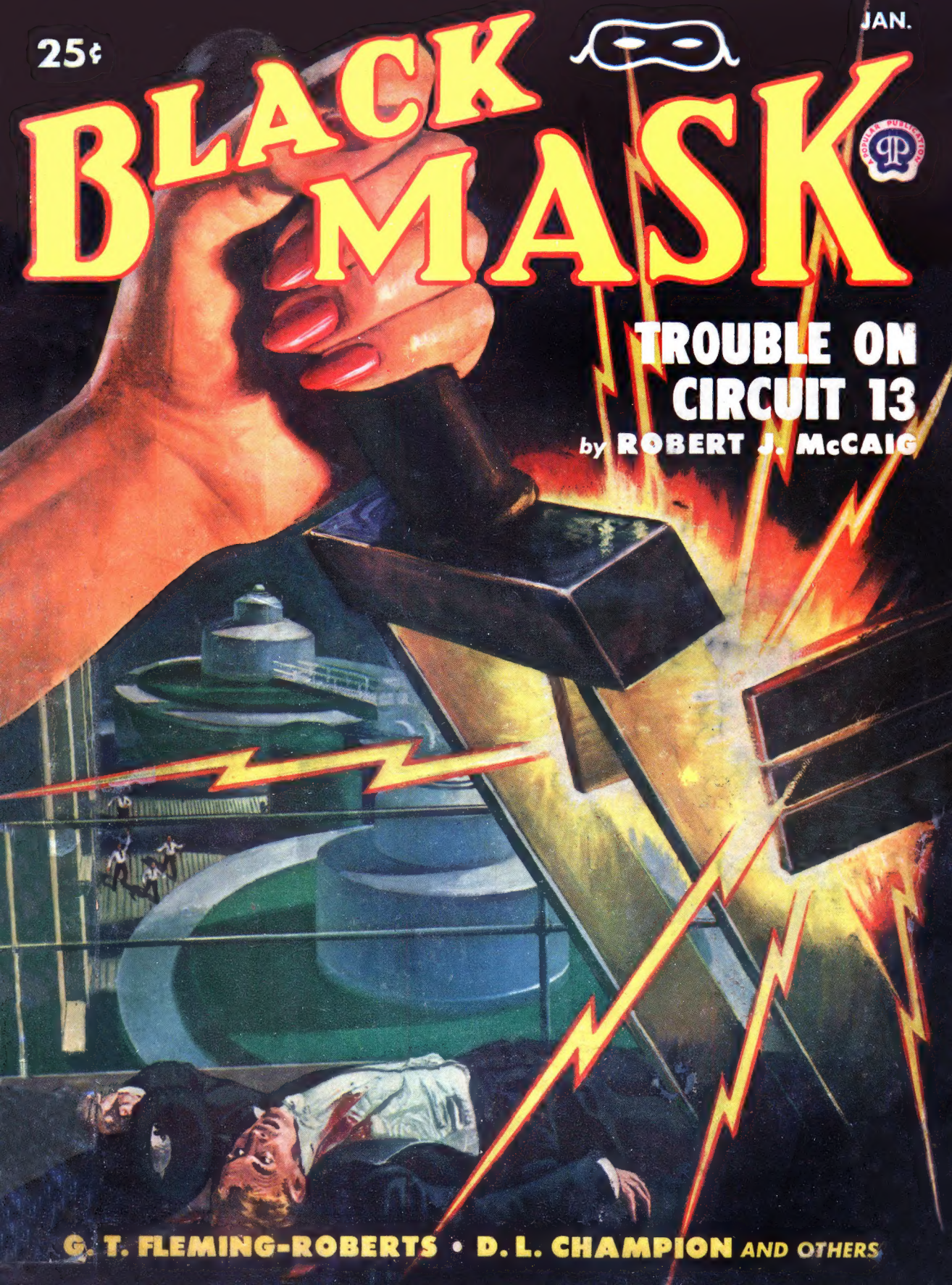
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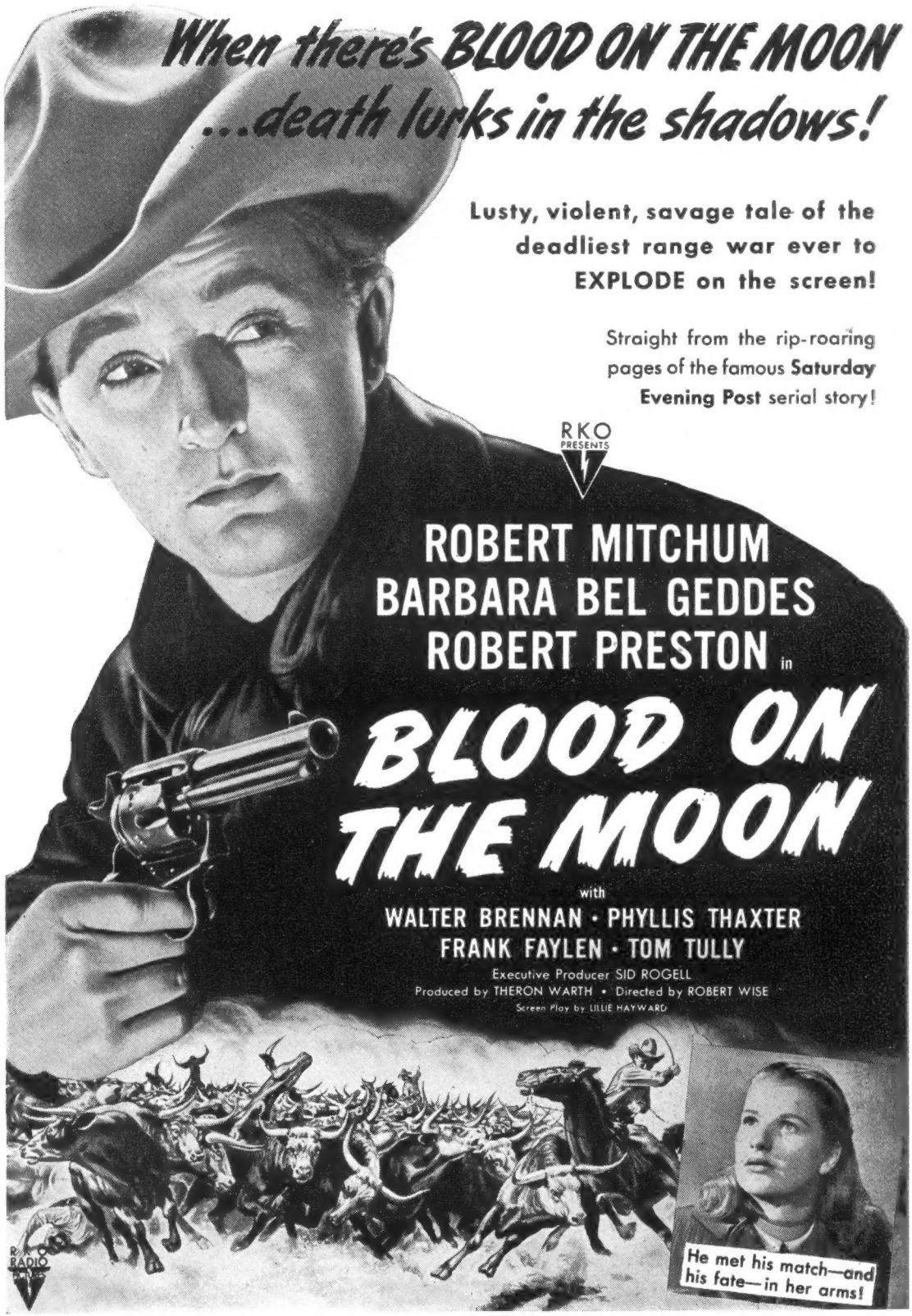
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# BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXII, No. 3 JANUARY, 1949

K. S. WHITE, *Editor*

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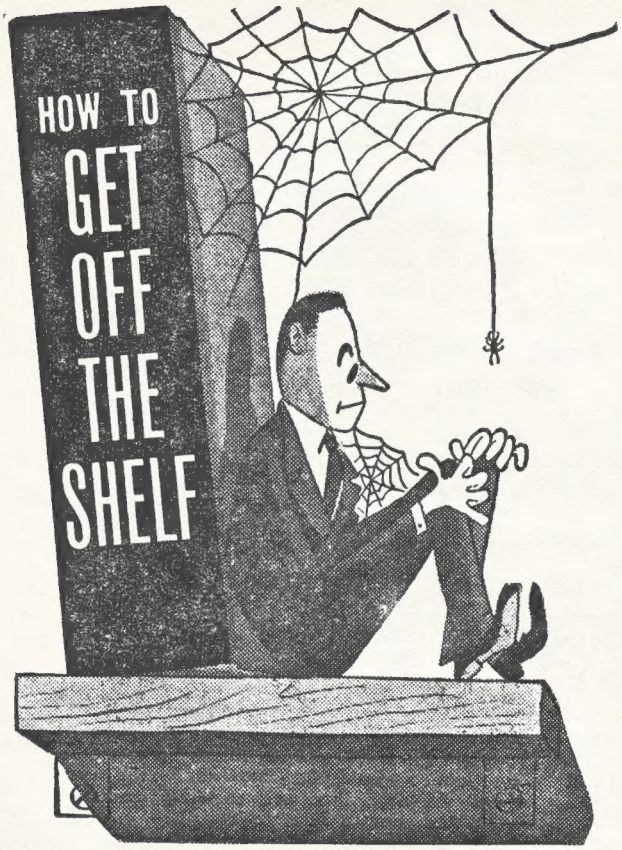


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# CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?

## OR CAN HE TAKE YOU?

**By JULIUS LONG**

1

You are defense counsel for Ken Oldwyn, charged with the murder of Mike Mitty. You concede that Oldwyn killed Mitty, but you enter a plea of self-defense. The prosecuting attorney introduces evidence to the effect that if Oldwyn had really been trying to defend himself, he would and could have run away from Mitty instead of remaining on the ground to resist Mitty's effort to kill him. The prosecuting attorney further argues that before an accused man can avail himself of the plea of self-defense, he must do everything possible to avoid taking the aggressor's life, including running away. Will your plea of self-defense for Oldwyn fail if it can be established that he could have saved his life by running away from Mitty?

2

You are the defense counsel for Pat McGurk, accused of the murder of Henry English. Your plea for Pat is self-defense. The D.A. offers evidence to show that Pat started the fight with English himself and that Pat therefore cannot avail himself of the plea of self-defense. You rebut this evidence with testimony to show that though Pat did indeed start the fight, he gave up while English was still well and healthy—and retreated as far as he could. But English advanced and beat Pat so murderously that McGurk had reason to believe that English meant to kill him. So he put up a fight again and killed English to save his own life. Will the judge instruct the jury that such rebuttal evidence sustains a plea of self-defense, or will he instruct the jury that if McGurk started the fight, he cannot claim the homicide was done in self-defense?

3

This question is a moral question rather than one of law and was inspired by a murder trial recently witnessed. The accused had been pled guilty, and three judges were hearing the evidence to determine whether a recommendation of mercy should save him from death in the electric chair. The testimony and argument propounded for the accused by his counsel argued that mercy should be accorded to him because he had come from a broken family, had had no childhood training worthy of the name, no education, and had run with bad and alcoholic company all his life. Therefore, insisted the man's lawyer, the poor fellow should not be sent to the chair—for he just never had a chance.

*(Continued on page 125)*

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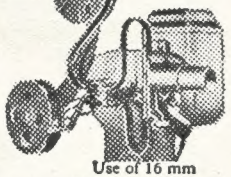

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# No Pockets in a Shroud

YOU have an exaggerated idea of my talents," I said. "I'm not a hired gunman."

Louis Bagnell allowed his face to smile, but his eyes neglected to join the effort. His smile was a gambler's smile, which was appropriate since he controlled most of the gambling in the city—and had controlled all of it before a Chicago immigrant named Byron Wade began to muscle in. For ten years no one had

**Manville Moon knew he was on the spot when he picked up two rival gambling czars for clients. And when their trigger-happy bodyguards were thrown in the deal, he was ready to try on a wooden kimono for size.**

By
RICHARD
DEMING

*Bagnell slumped in the chair, dead, while Mrs. Wade lay in a faint.*

opened a bookshop in town without Bagnell's personal O. K. . . Until Wade came along. But suddenly six new shops sprang up, and the rumor was Wade hadn't asked permission. Up to now Bagnell's El Patio had been the only casino in town too, but tomorrow was the grand opening of Byron Wade's North Shore Club, and the engraved invitations issued to a carefully selected clientele were rumored to intimate everything from slot machines to roulette would be available. It didn't require a Master's Degree to figure out a gang war was in the offing.

Louie said: "You've hired out as a bodyguard before."

"Sure. But you don't need a bodyguard. You've got two now." I glanced over at Vance Caramand, who leaned his back against my apartment door. "What's the matter with Vance?"

Bagnell said: "Vance is all right, except he's a moron." He spoke impersonally, as though the bodyguard were not there. "Greene has even less brains. I need someone smart."

We sat in my apartment living-room, where most of my business is discussed, when I have any to discuss. Since my sole advertising medium is a card beneath my doorbell reading: "Manville Moon, Confidential Investigations," and my business suffers from lengthy and frequent lapses between cases, office space would be superfluous.

I uncorked the rye bottle for a second time and looked at Bagnell questioningly. When he shook his head, I looked at Vance Caramand.

Bagnell said quickly: "None for him either. He's stupid enough sober."

Dribbling a little rye into my own glass, I slopped water on top of it. I said: "You don't want a bodyguard. You want an extra gun to meet Byron Wade's mob when war breaks. I'll stay an innocent bystander."

His face lost all expression, which suited it better than the false smile. He asked: "Is talk about me and Wade going around?"

"In certain quarters."

"For instance?"

"Among the lower element," I said. I grinned at him. "Among your crowd."

He rose, recovered his hat from my sofa and stood looking down at me. "Did I understand you to say you're not in this on either side?"

"That's what I said."

He studied my face as he would an opposing player in a poker game. "May I count on that?"

I looked up at him coldly. "I said it, didn't I?"

"I know," he said equably. "I'm not questioning your word. But you'd make a difference in my planning."

"Why?"

His lip corners lifted in a wintry smile. "You scare people. Some of my boys might walk out if they thought they were up against you."

I said: "I'm neutral. Don't bother to duck when we meet."

He motioned to Vance Caramand and they departed together. It was exactly three P. M.

ONCE, during the shambles in France, I hesitated for part of a second in deciding whether to go head first or feet first into a hole. Finally I chose head first, with the result that instead of having a detachable head, my right leg is detachable below the knee.

At seven-thirty P. M., fresh out of a shower, I was strapping the cork, aluminum and leather leg substitute in place when the doorbell rang. Pulling a robe over nothing, I clanked to the door on one metal and one flesh foot.

The heavy-jowled man standing in the hall wheezed from the exertion of his half-flight climb. His tailored clothes,

carefully cut to disguise a pot belly, failed in their mission.

A meagerly built, narrow-featured youth of about twenty rested his back against the wall next to the apartment facing mine. He had the coldest, most expressionless face I have ever seen, and his extreme youth only accentuated its cruelty. Yellow eyes measured me scientifically, as though picking the exact spot to place a bullet, if necessary.

"Mr. Moon?" the heavy man asked when he had regained his breath.

"Yes."

"I'm Byron Wade."

He handed me a fat, damp palm and gave me a fishy squeeze. When I salvaged my hand, I rubbed it dry against the nap of my robe.

I said, "Come in," and stepped aside to let him pass.

He walked past me into the living-room, and his youthful companion removed his back from the wall and followed. Wade made no offer to introduce him.

The boy took a chair facing the door, kept on his hat and sat with both hands in his pockets. His suit coat was tight at the waist, his knuckles showed through the cloth, and there was obviously nothing in the pockets but hands. Somehow this made me feel better.

Closing the door, I walked around Wade toward the bedroom, stepping off the rug onto the wooden floor with my right foot en route. The metallic clank brought Wade's startled eyes to my feet, but the boy kept his fixed on my face. Ordinarily it takes some concrete danger such as a fist or a bullet coming my way to start adrenalin pumping through my veins, but this kid had "Handle with care" signs all over him. He gave me the creeps.

I said: "I'll be with you soon as I dress. There's rye and mixings on the table. Help yourselves."

"Thanks," said Wade. "May I mix you one?"

"Yeah. I take water."

Ten minutes later, fully dressed, I sank into an easy chair next to Byron Wade and tried the drink he had mixed for me.

Wade started, "I know you're a busy man, Mr. Moon," which caused me to choke on my drink.

I leaned forward, fished for a handkerchief, and Wade, his mouth already open to deliver the second sentence of his pat speech, stopped short.

"What's the matter?"

I wiped my eyes. "Drink went down the wrong way."

"Oh!" He paused, reassembled his thoughts and repeated, "I know you're a busy man, so I'll get right to the point. I want to hire you as a bodyguard."

I glanced over at the kid, who still sat with his hat on looking vicious. "What's Junior?"

The kid tightened his lips and fixed unwinking yellow eyes on my face.

Wade said: "Danny? He's sort of a bodyguard. I need two."

I drained the rest of my drink. "I know you're a busy man too, Mr. Wade, so I won't waste time for either of us. No sale."

He jerked up his eyebrows and waited, as though expecting elaboration. When nothing happened, he frowned slightly and bugged out his eyes at me. I studied him in return, noting the red-veined puffiness about his eyes and nose and the blunt, pouty expression, like a small boy playing tough guy.

"You're already working?" he asked finally.

"No."

He waited again for explanation, until it was obvious none was coming. "I don't understand."

"It's simple. Nothing personal. I just don't like gang wars."

Wade's fat-encased eyes narrowed and his tongue flicked across his lips. "What's that mean?"

I said: "You don't want a bodyguard. You want an extra gun for the war brewing. I'll sit this one out."

Wade's eyes turned nasty and the veins in his fat cheeks disappeared as his whole face reddened. "So Bagnell got to you!"

I said, "Nobody gets to me, Mister. Go peddle your apples elsewhere," and got out of my chair to open the door.

Danny's body did not change position, but his right hand did. One moment it was jammed into his coat pocket, and the next it was under his armpit and out again. I'm supposed to be fast, but I wasn't expecting the movement and it caught me off guard. My fingers barely touched the P-.38 under my arm when I was looking into the tiny bore of a Woodsman Colt.

I let my hand reappear slowly, keeping my eyes on Danny's face. For the first time I noticed his eye pupils were enormously dilated.

"Can you do that without a sniff of coke?" I asked.

Danny's yellow eyes were cold. "Sit down, Moon."

"I like 'Mister' in front of 'Moon'," I said. "And I keep track. I can't argue with your pea-shooter, but you can't keep it out forever, either. The first time is free, but from here on every time you drop 'Mister', it's another lump on your head."

Byron Wade said: "Now, gentlemen, let's not have any trouble. I want you two to get along. Call him 'Mister', Danny."

Danny said: "Sit down, *Mister* Moon."

I sat down.

Wade said: "I'd like to keep this on a friendly basis, Mr. Moon. Can I tell Danny to put up his gun?"

"If you want," I said shortly.

"And if I do?"

"I'll blow his head off."

Wade pursed his lips. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I'm willing to apologize for that remark about Bagnell. I want to talk to you."

"All right," I said, seeing no point in holding a grudge. "But you can talk all night and I won't change my mind. You and Bagnell shoot all the holes in each other you want, and I'll read about it in the papers."

Wade said, "Put it away, Danny," and when the little gunman obeyed, turned back to me. "I'll accept your word that you're not with Bagnell, and won't try to urge you on my side. But you wouldn't have any objection to making an investigation for me, would you?"

"Depends on the investigation."

Wade glanced sidewise at his companion. "Don't you have to go to the bathroom, Danny?"

Danny's yellow eyes turned resentful, but the resentment seemed directed at me, and not Wade. He obediently rose from his chair.

I said: "Turn left in the hall."

When he heard the door close, Wade said: "Danny's all right, but the less people know your business, the better off you are. What I want you to do is solve a murder, in case it happens."

"In case it happens?"

"Yeah. To me."

Unsuccessfully I thought this over for a moment. "Go over that once more. Slowly."

He spread his hands impatiently. "I said it plain enough. If I die, you investigate. I'll pay you now, and if nothing happens, you're that much ahead. But you have to promise to investigate if I die."

"That should be easy," I said. "If you die soon, it will be a bullet from Bagnell's mob."

His lips tried to curl, but pouted in-

stead. "I can take care of bullets. I mean if my death seems natural, I want it investigated."

I asked: "What's going to happen to you?"

He frowned slightly. "Nothing, I hope. Don't ask me questions. Just take the job or leave it."

I finished my drink, set down the glass and said: "My fees are high."

"Consider a thousand?"

I considered a thousand for a fraction of a second and nodded. Without further comment he wrote out a check, watched me fold it into my wallet and then called: "Danny!"

Danny slipped back into the living room, swept an incurious glance over both of us and returned to his seat.

I HEARD a church clock strike eight, and suddenly remembered I hadn't eaten.

"Hate to rush you along," I told Wade, "but I'm overdue for dinner."

He said quickly: "Danny and I haven't eaten either. Like chop suey?"

"Sure. But if you think we're eating in public together, think again. Enough people dislike me, without giving Bagnell ideas."

"I had the Silver Goose in mind," Wade said. He looked at me expectantly, and I got the crazy impression that he was actually eager for me to dine with him, and was afraid I'd get away.

I said: "I don't care what you have in mind. I'm eating alone."

"Telf you what," he suggested. "The Silver Goose delivers. I'll stand the dinner if you phone and have it sent over."

I didn't particularly like the idea, but clients who hand out a thousand dollars for nothing deserve some consideration. I went into the bedroom, phoned the Silver Goose and ordered three chop suey dinners complete.

In about a half hour a boy delivered the stuff, and we ate in the kitchen. For dinner Danny deigned to remove his hat.

In the middle of his second helping Wade suddenly stopped eating, pushed back his chair and stared at me rigidly. I glanced sidewise at him, started to raise another forkful of chop suey, then laid it down when I noticed his set expression.

"What's on your mind now?" I asked.

His lips narrowed and his eyes half closed. I started to get mad, then noticed the fine beads of sweat on his brow and realized his fixed expression was not anger, but pain. Almost as I realized it he relaxed, rose from his chair and went over to the sink for a glass of water.

"Dyspepsia," he explained. "Catches me every time I eat too much."

Returning to the table, he thrust aside his plate and began to favor us with an appetizing account of his symptoms. He was proud of his dyspepsia. The phone rang and I was literally saved by the bell.

I went into the bedroom, choked off the phone in the middle of its second blast and said: "Moon."

The voice on the other end was like an artillery salvo. "Warren Day. Where the devil you been?"

The greeting was typical. Inspector Warren Day was chief of Homicide and we had a long-standing half-friend, half-enemy relationship.

"Why?" I asked.

"I had every dive in town checked. Never heard of you being home after sundown."

I waited while he grumbled some more about my being home where no one would think to look for me. Finally he got to the point. "I'm out at El Patio. They say here Louie Bagnell was at your place this afternoon."

"Who says?"

"One of his stooges. Vance Caramand. What about it?"

"Why not ask Louie?"

"He's too dead to answer. Think I'd waste time talking to you if anyone smart was alive? I want to see you. Get on out here to *El Patio.*"

I said, "Send a squad car," hung up and waited by the phone until it rang again.

"Yeah?" I said.

Inspector Day's voice hissed. "Listen, Moon, I said get out here. Now get!"

I said, "Send a squad car," and hung up.

Back in the kitchen Wade asked: "Did I hear you say something about sending a squad car?"

"Yep."

"What's up?"

I looked him over contemplatively. "I'm beginning to wonder. Come on out front, both of you. We'll leave the dishes."

They followed me into the living room, accepted a cigar each when I offered them, and retrieved their previous chairs.

When he was settled Wade repeated: "What's up?"

"Don't you know?"

He shook his head puzzledly. "How could I know?"

"That's what I'm wondering about." I checked my wrist watch. "It's nine-fifteen now. You got here about seven-thirty, didn't you?"

"About then."

"Makes a nice alibi, doesn't it?"

"Alibi? For what?"

Instead of answering, I puffed on my cigar, leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Two minutes of silence ensued.

"We really ought to be going," Wade said tentatively.

"Stick around."

He let another minute or two pass. "When you say, 'Stick around', are you asking us or telling us?" His tone was curious rather than belligerent, as though he really wanted to know.

"Telling you."

Danny set his cigar on an ash tray and looked from his boss to me and back again.

Wade said, "I just wanted to know," and went on smoking.

Lieutenant Hannegan of Homicide brought the squad car. When I opened the door he said: "Your feud with the old man catches me right in the middle."

"He loves it," I told him. "He'd be hurt if I gave him a respectful answer."

Stepping aside to let him in, I performed introductions. "Lieutenant Hannegan . . . Byron Wade . . . Danny. He hasn't got a last name"

Hannegan's brow creased at Wade's name. "How long you been here?" he asked bluntly.

"Since seven-thirty."

Hannegan turned to me. "That right?"

"Yeah. Didn't seem to want to leave. When was Bagnell killed?"

"Eight o'clock. How do you know he was killed?"

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"Sure. But the inspector didn't say how he died."

"I know," I said. "They're calling in Homicide for heart attacks now."

Hannegan continued to regard me suspiciously. "What was that crack about Wade not wanting to leave?"

"I started to throw him out at eight, but he talked himself into staying. Makes a nice alibi in case he knew something was scheduled to happen to Bagnell."

"Hey!" objected Wade. "What you trying to do?"

I turned my head at him. "Teach you not to use me as a sucker."

Wade said: "I don't know what you mean."

"I could be all wrong," I told Hannegan. "But Bagnell's pushing off is aw-

fully convenient for Wade. And I don't like the idea of being the alibi for a gang boss while one of his stooges was making a corpse."

"You got the wrong idea." Wade licked his lips and looked from one of us to the other.

Hannegan scratched his head thoughtfully as he turned things over in his mind. "You figure he sicked one of his guns on Bagnell, then leeched on to you in order to keep himself in the clear?"

"Something like that."

"Why pick you? A nightclub would do as well."

I said: "I've got an idea about that too. I'll hold it till we see the inspector."

Hannegan pointed his thumb first at Wade and then at Danny. "You guys are coming too. The inspector will want to see you."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Three-Parts Murder

OUR city, like Los Angeles, claims half the countryside in all directions. So although El Patio lies ten miles beyond the edge of the populated area, it still is within the city limits.

Twenty minutes after leaving my apartment we swung between squat stone pillars marking the driveway entrance to El Patio's grounds. To our left the car lights splashed against a ten foot wrought-iron fence which followed the curve of the driveway clear from the highway to the near edge of the fortress-like building called El Patio.

"Lot of iron in that fence," Hannegan remarked.

At the far end of the building the fence started again, ran about fifteen yards and made a ninety degree turn to the left. The drive also continued past the building and turned with the fence toward a parking lot at the rear. Our policeman chauffeur dropped us in front of broad steps descending from the massive bronze-doored entrance and then continued on to the lot.

A uniformed cop had replaced the dinner-jacketed ex-pug who usually guarded the portals of El Patio. He saluted Hannegan and stepped aside to let us in.

Like Gaul, El Patio is divided into three parts. The entrance leads directly into the gaming room and bar. Wide doors either side of the casino open respectively into a table-crowded ballroom and an even more table-crowded dining-room. Most of the patrons from these two rooms had collected in the center one and were wearing their coats and hats, ready to leave. Though the room was packed, no one was playing. The crowd had divided into individual groups, most of which quietly waited for something to happen. In place of the conversational drone you would expect from a crowd of two-hundred jammed into one room, you could hear only occasional low toned sentences.

In the hallway outside Louis Bagnell's private office three chairs from the dining room lined the wall. Vance Caramand occupied the first, and Fausta Moreni, the house's best blackjack dealer, sat next to Vance.

Probably Fausta's ability rested less on her skill with cards than on the demoralizing effect of her golden brown beauty on the players, but nevertheless she was one of the highest paid dealers in the country. Before the war, when Fausta was a naive Italian immigrant freshly escaped from Fascist Italy, her delightful accent fascinated me into thinking of her in connection with a future fireplace, slippers and a pipe. Long since we tacitly agreed to forget our plans, but I still felt sudden lightness when we met.

Tilted against the wall in the third

chair sat Mouldy Greene, who derived his nickname from a persistent case of acne. Mouldy had been in my outfit overseas, but since discharge assisted Caramand in guarding Louis Bagnell's body. Apparently neither of them had done a very good job.

As we approached, Mouldy said, "Hi, Sarge," in the pleased voice of an ex-soldier greeting an old comrade.

Fausta rose. I stopped and she touched my hands lightly with her fingertips.

"Manny," she said. "Is it only murder can bring you to see me?"

I said, "Hello, Fausta," and could think of nothing else because my eyes were full of the sleekness of her blonde hair and the way it emphasized the Latin darkness of her skin and eyes.

Hannegan said to Wade: "You and your punk wait here. The inspector will want Moon first."

As Hannegan reached for the knob of Bagnell's door, I noticed the lock had been shattered by a bullet. Before he could turn the handle, the door opened inward. Hannegan stepped back as two men carried out a sheet-covered figure on a stretcher. A police doctor followed behind them. The procession over, we went through the door in time to catch a flash bulb square in the eyes. For a few moments I saw nothing but floating red and green lights, then as they began to dim I made out three people in the room. Apparently we arrived just in time for the photographer's last picture, for he was packing equipment.

Inspector Warren Day's gaunt figure drooped in front of a woman seated on a sofa near the window. The woman was dressed for the street, complete to a startlingly small black hat and matching leather gloves. Her fingers played nervously along the zipper of an oversized bag in her lap as Day talked to her. She had the type of face painters set on canvas: precisely regular, and its whiteness framed by ebon hair. shoulder length and waveless. Her skin was translucent and glowed as though a hidden light burned somewhere within her. Except for the bright red of her sensual lips, she wore no coloring or makeup. She had been crying.

Warren Day turned, bent his skinny bald head until he could see over his glasses and rolled a dead cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"You!" he said.

Settling myself in a chair, I started fire to a cigar. Day approached until his spare body arched over mine and his face was nearly horizontal with the floor from his attempt to keep me in focus over his spectacles.

I said: "Why don't you sit down before you fall in my lap?"

"Start talking, Moon!"

I blew cigar smoke up at him. "Look, Inspector. I'm tired of this routine. You snarl at me a while and I tell you to go to the devil, and finally you stop being nasty and tell me what old pals we are, and won't I please tell you what I know, and then I tell you what I know. Why don't you save time by cutting out the preliminaries and acting human from the start?"

HIS LONG nose began to whiten at the tip, an anger register which never fails to fascinate me, but before the whole nose whitened, which was the indicator of his boiling point, he underwent one of the astonishing changes in temper he was abruptly capable of. His right hand suddenly patted my shoulder.

"You're a good boy, Manny. You're right. No point in us arguing. Life's too short."

He draped himself across a chair facing mine and smiled as though he had just gargled alum.

"What about this visit of Bagnell's to

you?" he asked, in what for him was a pleasant tone.

I shrugged. "Nothing much to it. He dropped in for a few minutes, then left. It was around three."

"What'd he want?"

"To hire me as a bodyguard."

Day looked startled. "Bodyguard!" Behind their thick lenses his eyes crinkled derisively. "You did a devil of a job."

"I didn't take it."

His expression turned interested. "Why not?"

"Didn't want it."

The inspector studied my face a long time. "Bagnell say why he wanted you?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why'd you say no?"

"Didn't want the job."

"Any particular reason?"

"No."

"You've hired out as a bodyguard before."

"That's what Bagnell said. I still said no."

Hannegan broke in. "Byron Wade and one of his punks were at Moon's when I got there."

Day looked at me curiously, a cynical smile quirking his lips. "I see. That's why you turned down Bagnell."

"Wrong again. I never saw Wade or his juvenile delinquent before. They came uninvited."

"What'd they want?"

"Wade offered the same proposition Bagnell had, and got the same turndown."

The inspector made no attempt to cover the suspicion in his eyes. "Kind of coincidental, both calling the same day."

"That's what I thought, until I heard Bagnell was dead. A little figuring considerably reduces the coincidence."

"How?"

"Suppose Wade knew about Bagnell's visit? It's common knowledge that a clash was brewing, and probably both Wade and Bagnell were keeping track of each other. The probability is Wade *did* know Bagnell came to see me. Suppose he also knew something was due to happen to Bagnell tonight? Visiting me just when he did was the smartest move he could make."

Day thought this over and said: "I don't follow."

"I can't explain it and be modest."

Day grunted. "You never were."

I said: "I've got a reputation of being a bad guy to have on the opposing team. For a supposedly tough character, Wade acts kind of timid. Maybe he wanted to know where I stood in time to call off the killing in case I was lined up with Bagnell."

The inspector let out a derisive snort. "You sure *think* you're tough anyway."

I shrugged. "I said I couldn't explain it and be modest."

Frank amusement glinted through his glasses. "You really think you're so tough Wade would just walk off and leave Bagnell with a clear field if he found you on the other side?"

"Not exactly. But I think he'd postpone Bagnell's funeral until he could arrange one for me."

The inspector's amused expression was replaced by a thoughtful one. "He might do that," he conceded. "I'll admit you're a *little* tough. About soft-boiled." His eyes turned dreamy and he went on as though thinking aloud. "Suppose Wade *was* keeping track of Bagnell? The contact would only report in periodically. Bagnell left your place at three, but Wade might not hear about his visit till several hours later. You figure when he did hear, he rushed right over to find out where you stood?"

"Something like that. And he found out I was neutral."

Day removed the cigar from his mouth, examined it carefully and re-

placed it in the opposite corner. "When he found out, why didn't he get to a night spot for an alibi?"

"Because he had one right where he was. He got to my place at seven-thirty and wasn't out of my sight till Hannegan arrived."

Day considered this. "It will be interesting to talk to Mr. Wade." He jerked his head in the direction of the brunette across the room, whose strained expression betrayed her concern over our conversation. "Incidentally, that's Mrs. Wade."

THE woman rose and moved toward us. She was taller than I had thought, about five feet six, and her movements were smooth as a ballet dancer's. Seated, her figure had been indeterminant. Now I noted her breasts and hips were overfull, but slim legs and a flat stomach indicated natural fullness rather than fat. She wore a light green, immaculately clean dress which fitted as though it were wax that had been melted, poured over her body and allowed to form.

"Did you call me?" she asked. Her voice had the deep tone of a cello.

Hannegan was already standing. I rose, but Day remained seated, making no effort at either answer or introduction.

"The inspector just mentioned your name," I said. "Excuse his manners. He goes to movies and has Hollywood ideas of how policemen should act. I'm Manville Moon. This is Lieutenant Hannegan."

After acknowledging the introductions with a poker-faced nod, she stood silent, her large zippered bag pressed nervously against her flat stomach. Day ran his sardonic eyes over the three of us, and the awkward pause lasted until the door opened and a placid looking policewoman entered.

Day growled: "About time you got here." He bobbed his nose at Mrs. Wade. "Search her."

Mrs. Wade's shoulders stiffened.

The policewoman said: "Don't get excited, dearie." Curving her thumb at an open door in the far corner, she asked Day, "That a bathroom?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, dearie," she said, and took Mrs. Wade's arm.

Mrs. Wade allowed herself to be led toward the open door. As it closed behind them, I turned to the inspector.

"O.K. I told you everything. What goes on? Or do I have to read it in the papers?"

Day rose from his slouched position, tossed his cigar on the floor and began to pace up and down with his hands behind him, a human imitation of Felix the cat, if you could call Day human. He started to talk in a rasping, singsong voice, more as though he were reviewing facts to organize his own thoughts, rather than impart information to me.

"Bagnell was shot through the head a little after eight. He was at his desk at the time and the bullet ended up over there." He gestured at a ragged hole in the wall directly opposite the bathroom door. "When they heard the shot, Vance Caramand and Mouldy Greene came running and found the office door locked. They pounded, got no answer, so Greene shot through the lock. Bagnell sat in his chair with the top of his head missing and Mrs. Wade lay in a faint this side of the desk. Nothing could be done for Bagnell, so Greene tried to revive Mrs. Wade while Caramand went out after Fausta Moreni. Seems both dopes realized they hadn't sense enough to handle things themselves. Fausta took one look, ordered the boys to touch nothing and let no one in the room. She also told them not to let Mrs. Wade out. Then she phoned us."

I said: "Fausta's a smart girl."

"Yeah. By the time we got here, Mrs. Wade was conscious again. Her story is that she came back here to cash a small check. Lost all her cash at roulette and wanted taxi fare home. I guess she did cash a check for twenty. At least Bagnell had one in his pocket and it's dated today. But it looks like the main reason for her visit was social. The bar waiter says he delivered a pint of Scotch back here at seven, and Mrs. Wade was here then. You can see what's left of the bottle." He pointed to the desk, where a bottle with merely an inch of liquor left in it stood next to a siphon and two glasses. "Also Bagnell had lipstick all over what was left of his face. The bar waiter says she's always back here Monday and Wednesday nights."

"That's nice, considering her husband's relations with Bagnell."

"Yeah. Anyway, she says she was just getting ready to leave when a gun went off, the top of Bagnell's head disappeared and blood started spattering around. She fainted."

"Where'd the shot come from?" I asked.

Day felt through his pockets and produced another tattered cigar before answering. He stuck it in his mouth, flicked a match alight with a thumbnail, then he shook it out again before lighting the cigar.

"We figure it came from the bathroom window. With the bathroom door open, you can look right through from outside and get a full side view of Bagnell's desk. Mrs. Wade didn't see a thing before the shot, but she got the impression it came from the bathroom—that is, was fired by someone actually in the bathroom. But that's impossible. All the windows here, including the bathroom's, have three-quarter inch steel bars imbedded in concrete. The only way in or out is by the door and that was in sight of either Greene or Caramand all evening. But both the bathroom window and door were open and the killer could easily have stuck a gun through the bars, blasted Bagnell and run. That way the shot would sound like it came from the bathroom, rather than from outside."

"What did you get from the bathroom window?"

"Nothing. A few prints on the sill, but they're all old and made from inside. The lawn beneath the window is close cut grass and wouldn't show footprints. The parking lot is only about twenty yards from the window, but the attendant didn't see anything or hear the shot."

The bathroom door opened and the two women came out. The police matron handed the inspector a .45 caliber Army automatic.

"In her purse," she said laconically.

MRS. WADE'S normally pale face had become chalky, but her chin was high and her eyes steady as she returned our combined stares. Her lips trembled imperceptibly.

Day said: "Heavy artillery for a lady."

"I have a permit." She offered a bit of paper.

Day glanced at it briefly. "Illinois. No good in this state."

Releasing the clip into his left hand, he tossed it to Hannegan. "Count 'em," he said. Then he slammed back the slide until it locked open. "Chamber empty." Inserting a thumbnail into the ejection slot as a reflector, he peered down the tube. "Clean. Hasn't been fired."

Hannegan, stuffing cartridges back into the clip, announced: "Seven. Full clip."

"O.K., lady," said Day. "Start explaining why you carry a loaded .45."

"I didn't realize you needed a different permit for each state. I thought a permit was good anywhere."

"I don't care about your blamed permit. Why do you need a gun at all?"

She said: "I play quite a bit. Roulette. Sometimes I win a lot—enough to invite robbery. I always carry a gun when I play, in case I win."

Day's expression was scornful. "That's the weakest I've heard yet, lady. Any house will send you home with an armed guard on request. Try again."

"It's the truth. Honest. Why else would I want a gun?"

"That's my question." He moved his pointed nose up and down, examining her from the elliptical curve of her low cut bangs to frail, open-toed pumps. Then he gave her gun to Hannegan. "Come in and register this tomorrow, lady. We'll keep it till then. Go on home. And be available when we want you." To Hannegan he said: "Let them all go, except Wade and his stooge. Get names and addresses."

As Hannegan and Mrs. Wade departed, I drifted over to one of the two windows on either side of Bagnell's desk. It was locked, and from where I stood I could see the other was also. Turning the catch, I raised the window and tested the steel bars which ran the window's vertical length about six inches apart.

"We tried them all," Day said behind me.

My window looked out from the back of the building. About twenty yards away the interminable ten-foot iron fence ran parallel to the building's rear. Beyond the fence lay the parking area, and two brilliant arc lamps suspended over it bathed the massed automobiles in bright glare, casting diffused light this side of the fence clear to my window. Pressing my face between the two center bars, I could see the iron fence continued on beyond the far edge of the building, separating the parking lot from the grassed area behind El Patio, to a point where both the lot and the lawn met heavily underbrushed woods. The fence disappeared in the woods, and from my window I was unable to guess which way it ran from there. But beyond the strip of woods, perhaps fifty yards from the lawned area, I knew the main highway ran.

I moved into the bathroom and switched on the light. Here the window was open, but the same type of bars made it impassable. Peering out, I saw the fence on this side was only about fifteen yards away and had a door-sized gate in it almost directly opposite the bathroom window.

I wondered if the gate were locked, and it occurred to me that ten feet of iron was lots of fence for a murderer to climb in an area partially lighted by arc lamps. Straightening away from the window, I tried to visualize in my mind just how the fence encircled the place. As you faced the front door of El Patio, Bagnell's office was set in the right rear corner of the building. The iron fence started at the highway about a hundred yards to your left, followed the drive which passed in front of the building until it met the building's left front corner, started again at the right front corner, and turned at right angles with the drive about fifteen yards farther on. Here it separated the drive from the right flank of the building, again turned sharply left at the parking lot behind El Patio and continued on behind the building until lost in the woods.

I became conscious of Inspector Day peering over his glasses at me from the bathroom door. I glanced casually around the white room, had an idea and lifted the porcelain top of the commode.

Day said: "We looked there."

I replaced the top, glanced at the washbowl, and then looked closer. The bowl's inside was wet and several minute, knobby bubbles ringed the outlet drain. I squeezed one flat with a forefinger and

rolled the finger against the ball of my thumb.

"Oil," I said.

Day peered into the bowl, his brow creased, then cleared again. He pointed to a bottle of brilliantine on a shelf over the stand. "Bagnell's hair slick. There's nothing in here. We went over every inch of both rooms. What you looking for?"

"Nothing. Just being nosey."

I returned to the office and looked around. The area near Bagnell's desk was a mess. Congealed blood matted his desk top, his chair and the rug behind the desk. Even in front of the desk, dark spots polkadotted the floor.

Day said: "He spilled all over everything."

"Yeah," I said, then abruptly: "You through with me?"

"Sure. Send in Wade on your way out."

Fausta, Caramand and Greene still sat in the hall.

Danny leaned casually against the door jamb, a cigarette drooping from his mouth, and the Wade family talked privately a few yards away.

I said: "The inspector wants you, Wade."

Wade turned toward me as I spoke and his face was flushed and sullen. Mrs. Wade patted his arm and shot a smile at me, her bright lips framing small, flashing teeth.

As Wade entered the office, I asked Fausta why she and the others continued sitting there.

"Inspector Day desires we stay where he can call us," she said.

"Well, you don't have to sit in the hall. Come out to the bar and I'll buy a drink."

My invitation was confined to Fausta, but everyone except Danny chose to


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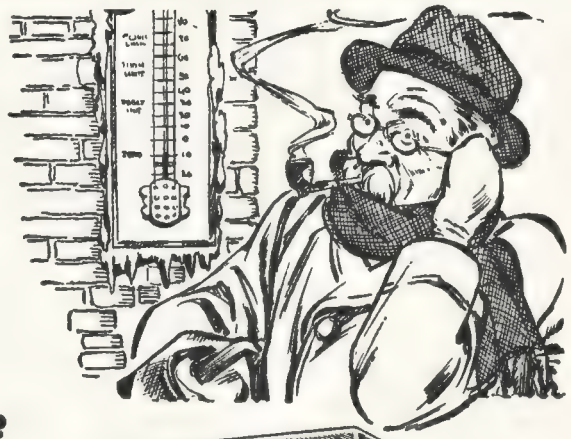

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accept. Mrs. Wade linked her right arm through my left, which brought Fausta out of her chair as though it were upholstered with tacks. She grasped my other arm so tightly, I halted and frowned down at her. With her eye corners on Mrs. Wade, she flicked her tongue at me, then relaxed her grip. We went into the bar three abreast, with Vance Caramand and Mouldy Greene trailing behind.

A rapidly diminishing crowd filed out singly as a cop at the door recorded names and addresses. No one at all sat at the bar. I slid onto a bar stool, Mrs. Wade took the one to my left and Fausta moved naturally in between us, smiling up at me vindictively.

I grinned down at her, crooked my finger at the man behind the bar and ordered five drinks. None of us said anything while the bartender put together our order. When it was served, Mrs. Wade raised her glass to me.

"To new acquaintances."

We all raised our glasses and Fausta said: "To old acquaintance."

We drank to both.

Mrs. Wade asked: "Could I talk to you privately sometime, Mr. Moon?"

"On purely business?" Fausta wanted to know, and she smiled her sweetest sulphuric smile.

"On purely business," Mrs. Wade assured her. Her eyes lingered innocently on Fausta, then returned to me. "You're a private detective, aren't you, Mr. Moon?"

"My license says so."

"When could I see you—on purely business?"

"Tomorrow." I passed her a card. "My flat is my office and I'm usually awake by noon."

"I'll be there at one." She slipped the card into her purse and smiled sidewise at Fausta.

Fausta moved around to my right, dug her elbow into Mouldy Greene's side and climbed onto the stool he suddenly vacated.

"Me, you never invite to your flat," she hissed in my ear.

"You're too young," I hissed back.

Her dark eyes snapped, but a demure smile curved her lips as she quietly gouged a spike heel into my instep. I grinned down at her, undisturbed. She had chosen my aluminum foot.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Death at First Sight

I FINISHED breakfast at 12:45 the following afternoon, just as my doorbell rang. It was Mrs. Wade.

She chose one side of the divan, crossed her legs and deliberately examined rounded knees to assure herself they were sufficiently exposed. I poured rye in two glasses and raised an eyebrow at her.

"Soda."

I let fizz into her glass, added water to my own and relaxed in a chair facing her. She carried the same enormous bag she had the previous evening. Zipping it open, she produced a silver case.

"Cigarette?"

I shook my head and scratched a match for her. Her cigarette aglow, she leaned her head against the divan back and inhaled slowly. She showed no hurry to open conversation. By the time her cigarette was half gone and neither of us had spoken, I began to grow impatient.

I said: "What's on your mind, Mrs. Wade?"

She smiled, making the corners of her eyes crinkle slyly. "Maybe I just want to get better acquainted."

"Sure. Love at first sight. Every woman I meet feels it. Now, what's on your mind?"

Her eyes remained bright, but she

smoothed away the smile and let her face grow serious. "I want you to solve this murder."

I fished a cigar from the end-table humidor and set fire to it before answering. Then I asked: "Why?"

The question seemed to surprise her. "What difference does it make why? I want it solved."

"Don't you think the police can solve it?"

"No." She stated it definitely, as though there were no question in her mind.

"But you think I can?"

She punched out her cigarette and immediately took another from her case. I held a match for her.

"I don't know whether you can solve it or not," she said. "If what I think is true, you probably won't be able to prove anything. That is, you won't be able to find evidence enough to convict anyone. But I don't care about that, if you can just find out what happened."

"What do you think happened?"

She blew smoke from her nose, watching me from half lidded eyes. "Will you take the case?"

I grinned at her. "Meaning you tell me nothing until I commit myself?"

She nodded.

"O.K. I'll take it. But before we go any farther, you'll have to listen to a short speech I sometimes inflict on my clients. Ready?"

"You mean like anything I say may be used against me?"

"Something like that."

"How dramatic. I'm ready."

"Once I take a case," I said, "I follow it until I get the answer. And I don't care whose toes I step on in the process. If the investigation turns in a direction you don't like, you may stop my pay, but you can't take me off the case."

She thought about this for a minute. "I think I know what you mean."

"A few minutes ago you remarked that all you wanted was the answer and you didn't care about the murderer being convicted. I play for keeps. If I crack the case, the police get all the evidence I dig up."

"You misunderstood me," she protested. "I meant you probably wouldn't be able to find evidence. He's more clever than he looks."

"Who?"

She leaned forward to kill her second cigarette and kept her eyes on the tray as she spoke. "Let's stop fencing. We both think my husband hired Louis killed. I heard most of what you told the inspector." Then she straightened and looked squarely in my face. "If Byron had him killed, I hope he hangs."

I said: "They use gas in this state."

She dug out a third cigarette while I filled her empty glass. When she was settled with both a light and a drink, she started to talk.

"I'm not familiar with murder," she said, "so I don't know how much you'll have to know. Suppose I go back two years?"

"Sounds like a nice distance," I agreed.

"Two years ago I was the wife of a man named Arthur O'Conner. He was a bookie in Chicago. One of Byron's bookies. We weren't any bargain as a married couple, but we got along. Then I met Byron."

She paused and took a long drag on her cigarette. I imitated her with my cigar and waited for her to get started again.

"I'm not going to paint myself whiter than I am. I started playing around with Byron. But I was only playing. He gave me things Arthur couldn't. Nice clothes and a little jewelry. I know it was wrong, but I never intended to leave Arthur. Not that I loved him particularly, but I was fonder of him than I was of Byron.

"Byron wanted me to divorce Arthur and marry him. I said no, but he kept insisting. Finally the situation became impossible and I told Byron I wasn't going to see him any more. The next night Arthur was killed."

She stopped and stared into her glass. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I said: "Yes?"

"He was run over by an elevated. They called it an accident, but no one decided just how he got up on the elevated track."

SHE raised her head and looked squarely at me again. "Maybe I'm rotten for marrying the man I half suspect had my husband killed, but that's what I did. I'm not making any bones about it. I married Byron because he had money. And of course I didn't really *know* he was responsible for Arthur's death. It was merely a possibility. But a second man dying is too coincidental. Is any of this important?"

"I don't know," I said. "But it's certainly entertaining. Keep it up."

"What I think," she confided, "is that Byron found out I was seeing Louis and had him killed, just as he had Arthur killed."

I asked: "Did your husband know you were at El Patio last night?"

"Oh yes. He knew I went there every Monday and Wednesday, but he thought it was for roulette . . . At least that's what I thought he thought, until Louis was killed."

"Were you in love with Bagnell?"

She looked surprised. "Of course not. I found him interesting, but it wasn't love." She stared at me petulantly for a moment. "I know I'm making myself sound like a tramp, but I'm not one really. You have to know how I feel about Byron to understand. I never loved him, and I haven't kissed him in over a year. Legally we're married and we live in the same apartment, but I don't feel married, so I don't act it."

"Is your husband normally jealous?"

She looked at me blankly.

I said: "I mean if you haven't felt or acted married for a year, you must have had other interesting friends. Does Byron have them all killed?"

She puckered her brow. "I see what you mean. No, he never did anything before, and he's had just as much cause."

"Did you know Bagnell and your husband were business rivals?" I asked gently.

Instead of the wounded frown I expected, her expression brightened. "Of course! Byron probably had Louis killed because he controlled all the handbooks in town." She seemed pleased at this solution and not at all touched in her vanity.

"But you still want him caught, even though his motive was purely commercial?"

"Yes. I still want him caught."

"Why?"

"He splashed blood on my dress."

My eyes jerked up at her. "Oh, he splashed blood on your dress!" Then, keeping the dialogue at its sensible level, I said: "I didn't see any blood."

"It was low. On the hem."

I said: "My fee is five hundred in advance and five hundred more if I solve the case."

She rounded her lips into a pouting O. "That's pretty steep."

"I don't work often."

She found a pen and checkbook in her bag and wrote a check for five hundred.

"Do you want to know anything else?" she asked.

"Yeah. Why do you carry a loaded .45?"

"I told you last night. You were there when the inspector asked me."

I nodded my head resignedly and rubbed out my cigar in the ash tray.

"Where'd you get it?"

"From a soldier."

I waited for elaboration, but she only smiled brightly as though she had made everything obvious.

"What soldier?" I asked finally.

"Just one I knew. A fellow named Joe."

"Another interesting friend?"

She pouted. "You're making fun of me."

"No, I'm not. I want to know."

She examined my face carefully for a sign of amusement, then said reluctantly: "I suppose you could call him that. I went dancing with him once or twice."

"Where'd he get the gun?"

"I don't know. Overseas, I suppose. He had several. German, Italian, English. All different types. He let me take my pick and I took the American one because he told me you couldn't get bullets for the others."

I said: "Tell me what happened last night."

She put out her cigarette and for a change didn't light another. "You mean everything, or just in Louis' office?"

"Start with when you got to El Patio."

After thinking a minute, she recited: "I arrived about 6:30. For a while I played roulette and lost about seventy-five dollars, all the money I had with me. Then I went back to Louis' office. He was expecting me, because I usually had a few drinks with him every Monday and Wednesday night. I had him cash a twenty dollar check and then he ordered a bottle of Scotch and some soda from the bar. We drank and talked about an hour, I guess, and all of a sudden, just as I stood up to leave, a shot came from the bathroom and blood started spurting from the top of Louis' head. That's all I remember, because I fainted."

"You didn't hear a sound outside the window before the shot was fired?"

"No. I heard nothing at all until the shot."

"And you're sure your husband knew you were at El Patio last night?"

"Yes. Positive."

"Is your husband still in love with you?"

She looked startled. "I hadn't thought about it." Her brow creased and she added slowly: "I suppose he is in a sullen sort of way. He'd like me back as his real wife again, but I think he's resigned to not having me. Why? Is it important?"

"It might be. And your answer isn't very definite. Do you really think he still loves you?"

She thought for a long time, her forehead puckered with concentration. "He's not jealous of me," she said finally. "But I'm sure he's still in love."

I rose. "That's all the questions I have now. Where can I reach you?"

She took the dismissal with good grace, getting up immediately and slipping on her coat. "Sherewood Apartments. Cleveland 3106. I'm always in mornings."

As I opened the door for her, she half turned toward me and smiled mischievously. "I came mostly on business, but partly to become better acquainted. You're an interesting man, Mr. Moon."

"Sure. Old ladies, children and dogs go crazy for me."

"I must be an old lady."

Suddenly she placed a gloved hand beneath my chin, swayed her body at me and pressed her lips solidly against my mouth. Then she was through the door and her laugh floated back from the hall.

The thought crossed my mind that perhaps I was one of those men you read about who attract women because of the rugged homeliness of their features. Going into the bathroom, I studied my face in the mirror, noting hard, flat lips, an obviously bent nose and one eyelid that

drooped slightly where a brass knuckle had caught it. Even with fresh lipstick on my mouth, I couldn't convince myself that I was ruggedly homely. I'm downright ugly.

I FOUND Inspector Warren Day glumly reading reports in his office. Easing into his spare chair, I snaked a cigar from the desk humidor before he could snap the lid on my fingers. He only glared when I asked for a match, so I dug out one of my own.

I said: "I'm on the Bagnell case."

"Ha! By itself murder isn't enough. Now I got you." He picked up his papers. "Go away."

"Be sensible," I said. "We're both after the same thing. Let's compare notes."

He shook his head emphatically. "I've bitten on that before. I give out and you give me the runaround. Who's your client?"

I ignored his question. "Wade didn't hire it done."

He glanced up quickly and suspiciously. "Is Wade your client?"

"No."

I waited while he fished a dead cigar butt from a cluttered ash tray, examined it and stuck it in his mouth. Then he slumped back in his chair, folded his hands across his stomach and waited for me to go on.

I said: "Everything points away from Wade planning it."

"That wasn't your story last night."

"Last night I didn't know what I do now."

We sat looking at each other while three minutes ticked by. I broke the silence.

"Answer me three questions and I'll tell you about Wade."

We sat through another pause. "All right," the inspector said resignedly. "Shoot."

"What did the autopsy show?"

The inspector sorted through his papers, picked out one and frowned at it. "He was killed by a .45 slug. In nontechnical terms, it caught him from the left and lifted off the top of his head. The direction from which the bullet must have come and estimated distance of the weapon makes it probable the shot came from the bathroom window. The bullet was imbedded in the opposite wall at a height indicating the pistol was fired from about window sill level."

I twisted sidewise in attempt to read the paper spread in front of him, but he scooped it into his lap.

"That's not an autopsy report," I said. "They don't put stuff about bathrooms and window sills in autopsy reports."

"So you're getting more than you asked for," Day growled. "This is my summary of the whole case. Any kicks?"

"No. You're doing fine. What did you get from Mrs. Wade's gun?"

He pretended surprise. "Get from it?"

"Don't play innocent. You ran ballistic tests."

"It hadn't even been fired."

I drew on my cigar, folded my hands and waited.

"O.K.," said Day. "So we don't take any chances. It wasn't the murder weapon. What's your third question?"

"Whose alibis have you checked, and who hasn't got one?"

"That's two questions."

"Don't quibble."

"It's too big a question. We've checked fifty or more. All Wade's guns have nice prearranged ones. Nobody else matters."

"All of them, eh? How good are they?"

"Perfect. Wade's mob is clear to the last man. Too clear for coincidence."

"Hmm," I said, wondering if my original theory of Wade being the murder engineer might not be correct after all, and my present reasoning sour. For a

minute I thought about it, then decided my new reasoning had to be right.

I said: "I guess that covers what I wanted to know. About Wade. . . His wife went to El Patio every Monday and Wednesday, and he knew it."

"You mean he knew she was fooling around with Bagnell?"

"No. He thought she went for the roulette."

Inspector Day unsuccessfully mulled this over. "Well? So what?"

"If you arranged a killing, would you pick a time when you knew your wife would be in the area?"

He sat up attentively. "I see what you mean. You think he'd almost certainly pick one of the five nights his wife didn't go there?"

"I would, if I had planned it."

"What makes you sure he knew his wife would be there?"

"Never mind. I'm sure."

He took the cigar butt from his mouth, looked it over carefully and exchanged it for another in the ash tray. He dusted ashes from the second before putting it in his mouth.

Then he asked: "If Wade didn't know Bagnell was due, why all the circus at your place?"

I shrugged. "You guess. Maybe he needed an alibi for something else, and Bagnell getting it when he did was coincidence. What else happened last night?"

"Nothing. Two bar room fights and a ten dollar stickup."

"Maybe what Wade had on ice went sour."

A rap sounded on the door and Hannegan came in. "Just got a new stiff, sir. A woman."

"Murder?" asked Day.

"Probably suicide, but the coroner wants you to have a look. A fisherman got her out of the river. Doc says she drowned last night."

I pricked up my ears. "What time?"

"About eight."

"Any identification?"

"Some. She wore an ankle slave bracelet with a name on each side. The outside says 'Gerald Foster', the inside 'Margaret O'Conner'."

I let out a low whistle.

"What's the matter?" asked Day.

"This could be the something else we're looking for."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Mrs. Wade's first husband was named Arthur O'Conner."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Blonde Bombshell

A PLACARD hanging on one of El Patio's double doors read, "Closed for Alterations." I pounded until the doors opened a crack

from the center and Mouldy Greene peered out.

When he saw who it was, he pushed the doors wide. "Hi, Sarge. Come on in."

"Don't call me Sarge," I said. "The war's over and my name's Moon."

"Sure, Sarge. Habit, I guess. How's the leg?"

I said: "You're a numbskull." I walked on through the empty casino into the dining room.

Vance Caramand sat at a table. Greene followed me into the room and flopped himself into a chair across from Vance.

I asked Greene: "Where were you and Caramand when Louie got it?"

Mouldy imitated deep thought, rubbed his chin and said: "I was at the bar. Vance was on duty."

"What's 'on duty'?"

"One of us always stays—that is, stayed—with the old man. But sometimes he got tired of looking at us. Last night he told us to stay the devil out of his sight. When he did that, we always kept watch on his door, kind of. He kicked us out at six-thirty and Vance took first shift. I was due to take over at eight-thirty."

"So at six-thirty he was alone in his office?"

"Yeah."

I turned on Caramand. "Who went in after that?"

He shifted malign eyes over me. "That dame. Nobody else."

"Sure?"

"I was sitting by the door."

"After the shot, how quickly did you get in?"

"Pretty quick."

"How quick is pretty?"

Mouldy interrupted. "It must of been five minutes, anyway. I didn't hear the shot, see, being way out at the bar. First I knew anything was wrong, the bar waiter walked in fast and said Vance was kicking on the boss' door. I went running, and first we try both our shoulders against it. It don't budge, so we stop to think and I get the idea of shooting out the lock." He made the last statement modestly, as though disclaiming a great mental accomplishment.

I said: "You're both smart boys. Where's Fausta?"

"In the old man's office with Gloria," Mouldy answered.

"Gloria?"

"A dame. One of the old man's."

When I knocked on Bagnell's door, Fausta's voice said: "Yes?"

Opening the door, I went in. Fausta and a plump, round-faced blonde sat side by side on the sofa where I had first seen Mrs. Wade. Fausta nervously patted the woman's hand. She looked embarrassed.

The blonde wept oversized tears which rolled down her reddened face and were skillfully caught in a balled handkerchief before they could spatter the front of a flowered dress.

Fausta said: "Hello, Manny."

"Hi. Is this Gloria?"

The blonde's head jerked up as though she were garroted. "Who are you?" Her eyes were frightened and she stopped crying.

"He is friend of mine," Fausta soothed. "It is not to be afraid."

I asked: "What are you afraid of, Gloria?"

"Nothing." She pressed the kerchief against her mouth and stared at me.

"She think her husband send you," volunteered Fausta. "She think her husband maybe kill her."

"Yeah? Who's your husband, Gloria?"

"It's nothing. Honest it isn't."

Fausta said: "Manny will not hurt you. He is friend of mine. You tell him, and he tell your husband leave you alone. Manny very tough man."

"Sure," I said. "Nobody's going to hurt you. What's your trouble?"

"He will! He said he'd cut my throat. And he will! He killed Louie, and he'll kill me too." She started to blubber again.

"Cut it out!" I said sharply. "What's this about killing Louie?"

Tears continued to roll, but she stopped sobbing. "He knew Louie and I were in love. He killed him."

"Who's your husband?"

"Amos Horne."

Fausta said: "He run Louie's bingo game at Eighth and Market."

"How do you know he killed Louie?" I asked.

"He must have. When he left last night, he called me awful names and said if I ever saw Louie again, he'd cut my throat. He said I was a tramp!" Sobs shook her plump shoulders.

"Shut off that water and answer questions!" I snapped at her, and she stopped suddenly in the middle of a sob.

She licked her lips and looked up at me wide-eyed.

I said: "I hate weeping women. One more sniffle and I'll take you home to your husband."

"Oh, no! I won't cry. Honest." Her big, dumb eyes pled with me like a stricken cow's.

I said: "Start from the beginning. How long did you know Bagnell?"

"About three months."

"How'd you meet?"

"Out here. Amos works nights, and I go out alone sometimes. One night I came out here and met Louie and he asked me to have a drink. We liked each other right off. It was sort of love at first sight. After that I used to come out every Tuesday and Thursday, and we'd talk in his office and have a few drinks."

"Why Tuesday and Thursday?"

She seemed surprised at the question. "Those were the quietest nights. Louie was never sure of being free other nights."

I asked Fausta: "Were those quiet nights?"

"Not more than others."

"Those were just the nights he had open," I said brutally. "Monday and Wednesday he had a brunette. Probably Friday and Saturday he had a red-head, and rested on the sabbath."

She said, "That's not true," and looked distressed. But she didn't start to cry again.

"So you were in love and saw him twice a week. When'd your husband find out?"

"I don't know. Last night was the first he mentioned it. He goes to work at six, and just before he left he told me he knew all about Louie and me and if I didn't stay away from him, he'd kill us both. He threatened to strangle me."

"Cut your throat, you said before."

"That's the same thing."

"It's not the same. Just what did he say? His exact words."

"He said, 'I'll wring your neck'."

I looked down at her bovine face a long time. "What did he say about Bagnell?"

"He said, 'I'll stop him making a tramp out of you, if I have to wring both your necks'."

"Is that all he said?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"It's a little different from threatening to kill you both," I said dryly. "Where was your husband last night?"

"He must have followed me here."

"Here? Were you here? Last night was the brunette's night."

She looked hurt. "I felt I had to talk to Louie. But he was busy. I was out front when it happened. I didn't even know about it until the police came, and when I heard Louie was killed, I got scared. I just stayed with the crowd and left when they did."

I said: "You sure must have been in love. How come you didn't rush to

throw your arms around the body?"

"I was too scared," she said defensively. "I knew Amos must have done it, and I couldn't go home, so I stayed at an hotel all night."

"Which one?"

"The Park."

"Under your own name?"

"No. Mary Smith."

"Original," I said. "What makes you think your husband followed you here?"

"He must have. He killed Louie, didn't he?"

I tried it another way. "Where was your husband supposed to be?"

"At work. His place opens at six-thirty and closes at one-thirty A.M."

"Where's your husband now?"

"I don't know."

I asked patiently: "Where is he usually this time of day?"

"At home."

"Address?"

"1418 Newberry. Apartment C."

To Fausta I said: "Can you put this gal up until I check on Amos?"

"Sure. She can stay at Louie's apartment upstairs."

"Good. Salt her away until I let you know it's safe for her to go home."

IN THE dining room I found Caramand and Greene in the same positions I had left them.

I said to Vance: "Who tended the parking lot last night?"

"Romulus."

"Where's he now?"

"Upstairs sleeping. He don't go on duty till five."

Mouldy said: "Tonight he don't go on at all. Nothing to tend."

Looking at my watch, I saw it was four.

"Get Romulus up," I told Vance. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes to talk to him." To Mouldy I said, "You can be my guide," and started toward the front door with the bulky bodyguard trailing along behind.

From the driveway I examined the chunky building. Even with two stories it was squatly stockadelike, an impression partly due to its shape and heavy stone construction and partly to the thick bronze doors and vault-like windows with their vertical bars. We started to circle the drive around the building's right side, but I stopped before we came to the turn in order to examine more closely the wrought-iron fence.

At the edge of the building the horizontal components of the fence were set in mortar between stones. Midway between this point and where the fence turned with the driveway was a door-sized gate similar to the one I had noticed through Bagnell's bath window the previous night. It closed from the outside with an iron padlock. I lifted the lock, noted the hasp was rusted to the frame and let it clang back against the gate handle.

"No one's gone through here for a long time," I said.

"Guess not," Mouldy agreed in the polite tone people use when they don't understand what you're talking about and think they should.

From our position near the corner of the building we could see the whole front of El Patio and the entire length of one side. I saw that all the lower floor windows were barred.

We walked on to where the drive turned, and turned with it toward the rear. I stopped at the gate I had seen the previous night from the bathroom window. It was locked by an iron padlock identical to the other, also rusted shut.

"How do you get from one side of this fence to the other?" I inquired. "Nobody's used these gates for years."

Mouldy lifted his shoulders and let them drop again. "No one but Romulus

comes back here. Maybe he climbs over."

Continuing on, we turned the corner where the drive entered the parking lot and the fence ran off toward the woods. Directly opposite the center of the building's rear we came to a third gate. Its padlock was brass and looked new.

"Who has keys to this?" I asked.

"Just Romulus, as far as I know."

Paralleling the fence, we walked along the gravelled lot until we met the treed area at its end. The fence ended here too, s u d d e n l y and incompletely. I stepped around its edge onto the back lawn.

"Fine fence," I said. "Blocks three sides, but anyone could get in here from the highway."

"It's just decoration. Louie counted on the bars for protection."

I grunted, thinking they hadn't proved very protective.

We pushed out into the undergrowth, circumnavigating bushes where we could and plowing through when no break was apparent. In about fifty yards we came to the highway.

Almost immediately we found what I had hoped for, tire marks on the clay shoulder. I squatted to examine them and Mouldy followed suit, screwing up his face in an unsuccessful attempt to look intelligent. The automobile had pulled its two right wheels completely off the road, leaving tracks in the shape of a fifteen yard arc. A slight depression in the center of the arc, smooth and designless, told that the car had stopped, then spun its wheels in starting again. The tread marks were interesting. They consisted of little round dots made by the suction cups of skid-proof tires. I liked that. Such tires are rare, except on commercial vehicles.

Rising, I looked up and down the edge of the treed area in an attempt to detect e v i d e n c e of anyone having forced through the underbrush. I not only found none, I couldn't even relocate the spot we had broken through. I am not a woodsman.

We plowed back through the fifty yards of growth and found a sleepy Negro boy waiting for us in the parking area.

"Ize Romulus," he announced. "Mr. Vance say you all want talk to me."

I said: "Is Romulus your first or last name?"

He scratched his head and grinned a white, horse-sized grin. "Both, ah guess. Romulus all I got."

"Where were you when Mr. Bagnell was shot, Romulus?"

"Right here somewhere, I e x p e c k. Must have been right about here when Mr. Louie got it."

"Seems you should have heard the shot, then. The bath window is only twenty yards from the lot."

"Yes suh. But like I tole that other policeman, I could been up this end putting in a car. Lots of cars goin' in and out last night. Maybe I hear it and think it's a backfire, or maybe I racing some enjine and just don't hear it. Leastwise, I don' recollect no sound might have been a shot."

I asked: "Any more gates through this fence aside from the one in front, the one on the side and this one here?"

"No suh. Sure ain't."

"None in the part running from the front to the highway?"

"No suh. Jes pure fence."

"Who has keys to the gates?"

"Jes me, suh. Not even Mr. Louie kept no extra keys. Ain' no use anyone else having keys. No one goes back here 'cept me, cut grass now and then."

"And the murderer," I added.

He rubbed his knuckles over the clipped wool he used for hair. "Yes suh. Guess *he* come back here all right."

"Was this gate locked?"

"Yes suh. I allus lock this here gate five o'clock when I come on."

"Five? You mean it's open before that?"

"Yes suh. Nothin' locked up till five. That's when the bank truck come wif money for all them games Mr. Louie had. Daytimes I leave this here gate open for tradesmen deliver stuff to the kitchen. They unloads here, carts de stuff over that door there." He pointed to the lone door at El Patio's rear, directly opposite the gate.

"Is that locked at five too?" I asked.

"Yes suh. And barred from de inside."

"Then whoever shot your boss must have come through those trees from the highway, because there isn't anywhere else he could come from. He'd have to walk the whole length of the building's rear, and then back again after the shooting. Your overheads throw at least some light back there. How come you didn't see him?"

"Ah sure don' know, suh. I jes plain didn't hear nothin' or see nothin'."

We left him there on the lot, scuffing his feet against the gravel and staring after us yawningly.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Blackmail Union

I FOUND Fausta alone behind the bar mixing herself a rum and coke.

"Make mine rye and water," I said. She deftly pulled a cork from a new bottle and measured out a portion by eye.

"Very professional," I admired. "Got a union card?"

"I only pretend like Joe, the barkeep. That's probably too strong."

"Better than too weak." I sampled it and it almost curled my hair. When I recovered my breath, I asked: "Where's Gloria?"

"Upstairs in Louie's bed—she is taking nap."

"How romantic. Who gets Bagnell's dough, Fausta?"

"They not yet read the will."

"I know. But you're a smart little girl. Who gets the dough?"

She screwed up her nose at me. "You take me out tonight?"

I looked up at her, exasperated, then laughed. "Make it tomorrow, blackmailer. What's the dope?"

"His sister get everything except $100,000 and El Patio. The race wires nobody get, because the syndicate lease to whoever they want now."

I frowned over this. "That means Byron Wade steps in and ties up every bookshop in town, unless someone in Louie's mob is smart enough to wear his pants."

"No one smart enough. Greene the smartest of lot, and he a jolt."

"You mean a jerk," I said. "Who gets this place?"

"Me. And $100,000 for a bank."

I whistled. "Nice business to inherit." Then I thought of something. "How come he was so nice to you?"

I must have been scowling, because she laughed suddenly. "You jealous," she accused.

"I am not. I'm just trying to solve a murder." I tried to relax the woodenness of my face and added stiffly: "Your relations with Bagnell are your own business."

A secret grin, as though at some remembered inner thought, hovered on her lips.

"All right," I snapped. "Why'd the old roue cut you in?"

"Four year ago, when I begin deal for Louie, he want very much make love to me."

She stopped to sip her drink and her eyes danced at the increasing color I couldn't keep out of my face.

"It's this drink," I growled. "You left out the water."

She went on, her eyes still dancing. "I say no, and he give me many fine clothes and pretty jewels. I say thanks, but I still say no and he change his will like it is now and show it to me."

"All this," I broke in, "was while I was overseas crawling around in the mud!"

Her head went up high. "And what, Meester Moon, have you in the mud got to do with something?"

"You were engaged to me!"

"And who breaked it up?"

Our hands gripping the bar edge on either side, we glared at each other like angry kids. I recovered first and realized we were acting juvenile.

I forced a grin. "We both did. You moved out of my class, and I moved out of your way."

"You never asked do I want you move."

"Let's not revive dead issues, Fausta. You were telling about the will."

Her eyes stayed violent and she raised her glass to gulp her drink with an offended flourish. I continued to grin at her until her expression turned to a pout, then a penitent smile.

"O. K.," she conceded. "We friends again. After Louie show me the will, I still say no and he say what do I want—to marry him? I say it is nothing I want from him but to deal his cards for my very good salary. He grumble a while and finally leave me alone, but I know he never change back the will."

I got another unpleasant idea and blurted it out before I thought. "He wasn't intending to change it soon, was he?"

"Not that I know." Then the meaning of my question struck her. "What you mean, Manny?"

"Just what I asked."

"You mean do I kill Louie?" Her eyes were still and disbelieving and her lips unnaturally straight.

I retreated fast. "Of course not, baby. I just asked a question."

The hurt went out of her eyes at "baby", a special word I hadn't used since she stopped being my special girl, and some of the tautness left her face. "You looked so like a detective, Manny. For a minute I feel strange to you. Why you call me 'baby'?"

I said, "Pour in more water," and pushed my half empty glass at her.

She held it under the faucet for a moment, then set it back on the bar.

"Why you call me baby?" she repeated.

I tasted my drink and said: "Much less poisonous. You know, Fausta, a hundred thousand is lots of dollars, but not much to back a place with this class clientele. A bad run the first night could wipe you out."

She watched irritably while I poured down the rest of my drink. "You change the subject," she accused.

I summoned up an insincere expression of innocence. "I mean it. A hundred thousand is no bank for this place."

She shrugged resignedly. "I shall close the casino and make into it a cocktail lounge. Less money I make this way, but I sure of what I make. You like going in nightclub business, Manny?"

I grinned at her crookedly. "Thanks, Fausta, but I'm a lousy chef. Who was mad at Bagnell aside from Wade and his mob?"

"No one. Unless Amos Horne."

"Got any ideas at all about this thing?"

"No."

I straightened away from the bar. "Then I'll see you around, Fausta."

She scurried around the bar and caught my coat-tail. "Not so quick, my one. Tomorrow night you come what time?"

I snapped my fingers. "Oh yes. Tomorrow night. How about eleven?"

"Manny Moon!" She stamped both small feet like a child preparing for a tantrum. "I know your one hour dates! You get me eleven, take me home midnight. You come eight o'clock."

"Nine," I temporized.

Her eyes snapped. "O. K. But you one minute late, I cut out your heart."

IT WAS 5:45 when a taxi let me out at 1418 Newberry. I rang the bell of apartment C, but nothing happened, so I pushed it again and kept my finger on it until I heard footsteps. The door abruptly jerked wide.

Although the man outweighed me, I had to look down to see his face. His head, like an upright pear, set the design for his body, which coned outward from narrow shoulders to thick hips and horseshoe legs. The last time I had seen a figure like his, it had been in a cage and I threw peanuts at it. He was in his undershirt and could have used on the top of his head some of the excess hair which matted his arms and shoulders. I guessed his age as forty-five.

"Amos Horne?" I asked.

"What you want?"

Putting one hand against his chest, I pushed him back into the room and kicked the door shut behind me.

"I'm Moon. Your wife sent me."

His fists clenched, but he left them dangling at his sides. His eyes narrowed scornfully. "Where is the dumb tramp?"

I said: "Sit down and we'll talk about things."

"Lissen, you got a lousy nerve busting in here and telling me to sit down. If you got a message from my wife, spill it and scram."

I said: "Sit down."

His face reddened and he started to raise one fist. I didn't move, and when his hand got shoulder high the fist unclenched, his expression turned uncertain and he used the hand to scratch the fuzz over his ear. He sat down.

"What you want?" he asked.

I unfolded onto a sofa next to his chair. "I'm a private investigator, and I want some answers. You don't have to give any, but if you don't, I'll put a bug in the ear of Inspector Day at Homicide, and then you *will* have to give answers."

"Homicide! I ain't killed nobody."

"Good. Then you won't mind questions. Where were you last night?"

"Wait a minute. What's this all about?"

"About a murder. Louis Bagnell was killed last night. Don't you read papers?"

He looked startled, then a wary expression grew in his eyes. "I ain't seen the papers. I work nights and haven't been out all day. What's Bagnell got to do with me?"

"Nothing. Except he was playing your wife and you threatened to kill them both."

His mouth opened in what could have been honest amazement. "Did that fool wife of mine say that?"

"She did."

"To the cops?"

"Not yet. But she probably will if they ask her."

He let out a sigh of relief. "Look, Mister . . . What you say your name was?"

"Moon."

"Moon," he repeated with a thoughtful frown. Then half-recognition dawned in his eyes. "Yeah. I've heard of you. Look, Moon, my wife is a moron. I never said I'd kill nobody."

"What did you say?"

"I don't know. I was mad when I found out about her and Bagnell and just spouted off a lot of stuff. But I never said I'd kill nobody. It was something general, like you say when you're mad. Like I'd beat both their brains in, or wring their necks or something. But,

cripes, I didn't mean I really would!"

I said: "Funny you use the term 'wring their necks'. Did I tell you Bagnell was strangled?"

His jaw dropped. "I thought he was shot!"

"He was. Now tell me how you knew."

His face changed from startlement to sullenness, then a begrudging grin spread across it. "Walked into that neat, didn't I? It's been on the radio all day. I figured I'd be smart and not know nothing. Guess I was too smart."

"Let's go back to my first question. Where were you last night?"

"I work from six-thirty to one-thirty in the morning."

"That's not what I asked."

"I was at work."

"Where's that?"

"I run a bingo game at Eighth and Market."

"Got a telephone here?"

He looked surprised. "Yeah. In the hall."

"What's the number of your bingo hall?"

He pursed his lips and shook his head back and forth. "Sorry. It's a private listing. We don't give it out to everybody."

"I can just as easily phone Homicide and have them check."

I let him think it over for a minute. He said: "Fairmont 2103."

I found the phone in the hall, dialed the number, and after a long time a male voice answered.

"Amos Horne there?" I asked.

"Naw. We ain't open yet."

"This is a friend of his. When's the best time to catch him?"

"He gets here about six-thirty."

"That's too early. How late's he stay?"

"Till closing. One-thirty."

"He wasn't there last night," I objected. "I was in about eight."

The voice on the other end grew impatient. "He went out for a while last night. He'll be here tonight."

I said, "Thanks," and hung up.

When I returned to the living room, the begrudging grin was back on Horne's face.

"All right," he said. "I was gone from the hall from seven to nine. Does that prove I bumped Bagnell?"

"It might. What's *your* story?"

"I was just riding around. Couldn't keep my mind on business for thinking about Gloria, so I put one of the guys in charge and took a drive."

"Where?"

"Just around."

"For two whole hours?"

"Yeah."

"Go near El Patio?"

His mouth quirked insolently. "Yeah. Drove out the highway right past it. Didn't stop."

"Stop here?"

His eyebrows were built straight across his forehead, undivided, like a hairy rope. Now one raised, forming a startling broken stair design.

"Why should I stop here?" he asked.

"To see if Gloria were home. Did you?"

"Suppose I did? So what?"

"So you did." I rose. "Get your shirt on."

He rose also. "Now wait a minute. You're no cop. You got no right to arrest me."

"Relax. I'm not arresting you. Get your shirt on."

He watched my face undecidedly, scratched his ear fuzz again, then went into the bedroom. In a few minutes he came out fully dressed.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Where do you keep your car?"

"Garage in back."

"Let's go."

I followed him down some back stairs and across the rear yard to the alley. Lifting the center of three identical sliding doors, he exposed a 1938 Ford coach. Without stirring from the alley, I could see his tires were new synthetics and treaded with a V-thread.

"Got any other cars?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I ain't a millionaire."

"O. K. You can close it again."

His left eyebrow made its queer twisting jump again. For a moment he looked at me curiously, then reached up, caught the door's bottom edge and slammed it against the concrete floor.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"I just like to look at cars. It's a fetish. What shall I tell your wife?"

"Tell the blamed fool to come home."

"And get her ears knocked down?"

"Aw, I wouldn't slam her."

"I'll tell her," I said. "And I'll see you around."

I walked down the alley until it met a side street.

FROM a drugstore booth I phoned Warren Day at his home.

"Find out who the dame with the slave bracelet was?" I asked.

"No." He sounded tired. "We had Mrs. Wade down to look at the girl's body. She didn't know her. She said her first husband had a cousin in Belleville, but couldn't remember her first name and wasn't even sure the last was O'Conner. We're checking Belleville. Mrs. Wade said her first husband had no other relatives, far as she knows."

"How about the other name on the bracelet?"

"Gerald Foster? Nothing yet. But the story'll be in tomorrow's papers. We're hoping Gerald can read."

I asked: "Any other progress?"

"Listen," Day said, "I run Homicide, not the information bureau. Go out and dig up your own dope."

His receiver slammed in my ear.

Early the following evening, just as I finished a painful second shave before my date with Fausta, the doorbell rang. It was Mrs. Wade, an unnecessarily hot fur collar haloing her cool face. Glancing beyond her, I saw she was alone and stepped aside for her to enter.

"I've come for my report," she announced, arranging herself in the center of my living room sofa. "Isn't that how it's done? I mean, aren't I supposed to come after a progress report periodically? I never hired a detective before." A mocking light twinkled deep in her eyes as she shrugged out of her fur jacket.

"What's on your mind?" I asked. I began to mix two drinks.

Her brows raised. "I told you. A progress report."

I handed her one of the glasses and leaned back next to her with my own. I didn't say anything.

"I mean it," she insisted. "I want a progress report."

"Get your gun back from Inspector Day?" I asked.

"Of course. Before I came here yesterday."

"Got it with you?"

Her forehead puckered and her tone doubted the necessity of my question. "I only carry it when I play. Why?"

"Just wondered. Who's Margaret O'Conner?"

Setting her drink on the end table, she turned sidewise to face me. "I'm angry about that. Why did you tell the inspector I was married before?"

"Is it a secret?"

The question made her pause. "No . . . But I'm your client and if you hadn't told him about Arthur, I wouldn't have had to visit that cold morgue to look at bodies. Aren't you supposed to protect clients from things like that?"

I grinned at her. "Who's Margaret O'Conner?"

"I don't know. I never saw her except at the morgue." She shivered in recollection. "What has she to do with Louis' death, anyway?"

"Nothing, probably, except in a negative sense. If she's related to your ex-husband, it might tend to eliminate your present spouse as a suspect in the Bagnell case."

She looked puzzled.

"It reasons like this," I explained. "Only two things point to your husband as engineering Bagnell's death: the general belief that they were gunning for each other and the fact that Byron obviously built himself an alibi for that night. The jealousy motive isn't very strong, because there's nothing to show he knew Bagnell was one of your interesting friends, and even if he did, you say he isn't jealous.

"On the other hand, one thing definitely points away from your husband planning the killing. He knew you always played at El Patio on Monday and Wednesday. You say he still loves you, and with five other nights to pick, he'd certainly not choose a night when you were there."

She frowned, started to comment and changed her mind. I went on with my line of reasoning.

"So when it develops that a gal wearing the same name as your first husband fell in the river at almost the same time Bagnell got shot, there's a strong possibility that Byron's prepared alibi was to cover himself for her death, and Bagnell's simultaneous assassination was coincidence."

"But why would Byron have her killed?"

"You suspect he killed your first husband. Ever hear of blackmail?"

Her face lighted in comprehension. "But that would mean Byron had nothing to do with Louis."

"I've been saying that for five minutes."

She began to chew her lower lip and frown again, almost in disappointment.

"You don't have to be mad," I said. "I can't help it that your husband doesn't commit the crimes you'd like him to."

"Don't be silly," she said quickly, then added: "I still want my progress report."

"What are you going to do with it?"

Her lips thrust forward in a pout. "I want to see if you're working and earning all that money I gave you."

I gave her a quick look, but she seemed serious. Her eyes were wide and determined and she leaned forward as though preparing to hang on my every word. I shrugged, set down my drink and recited rapidly:

"El Patio is built so the logical way for the murderer to get on the grounds was from the highway through a grove of trees. If he came any other way, he

was nuts, because he'd have to climb a ten foot fence. There are fresh tire marks where a car parked half off the highway next to the grove of trees.

"Bagnell was playing with a blonde every Tuesday and Thursday." I paused to give her a malicious grin, but her expression remained only interested. "The blonde's husband found it out. He admits he was mad at both Bagnell and his wife and that he drove past El Patio about the time Bagnell was killed. But he says he didn't stop and his tire treads don't match the marks I found. Temporarily I've ruled him out as the killer. That's as far as I got before I grew sleepy. Now what's the real reason you're here?"

She yawned and arched her body against the sofa back, causing the cloth to tauten across her overdeveloped bust. "I got lonesome."

"Sure," I said. "And you can't resist me."

"I don't try. *You* resist me."

She inclined her head slightly and dark hair rippled against my shoulder. When I looked down, her eyes were mocking.

"You're the ugliest man I ever kissed," she said.

I couldn't see that this required any comment.

"But you've got a nice body," she continued. "And something even more important. Something women notice."

"Yeah?" I was conscious that my conversation definitely lacked drawing room brilliance.

"You have a virile look."

I considered this, not exactly liking it, and gave her a puzzled frown. She laughed, and twisting toward me, placed a palm on either side of my face. Her lips came up, enveloped mine and suddenly turned greedy. She lifted her body toward me, clamped her arms around my neck and hung on as though she were drowning. I cooperated in the kiss, more out of curiosity than desire.

Eventually she drew back her head and looked up into my face. Her pupils had grown large and dark, her face wore a strained expression and smeared lipstick, mixed with perspiration, covered her upper lip. Almost inaudibly she asked: "What are you thinking?"

I said: "I'm thinking that I have a date in thirty minutes."

Instantly she straightened away from me, her eyes suddenly furious.

"You dead lump!"

Rising, she flounced out of the room and I heard the bathroom door slam. I shrugged, went over to the mirror above my mantle, and used a handkerchief to remove lipstick from my face. In less than two minutes she was back with her makeup again in order.

Smiling as though nothing had happened, she said: "I'll drop you off at your date."

## CHAPTER SIX

### In the Line of Fire

ELEANOR'S car—she was "Eleanor" instead of "Mrs. Wade" since our momentary love scene—was a Zephyr convertible. She drove as though she were part of the car, and kept her eyes on the road.

As we turned on to the main highway, she said: "I'm a fool. Why should I drive you to a date with another woman?"

"Why not?"

She frowned without moving her eyes from the concrete strip. "Do you think I throw myself in the arms of every man I meet?"

"I don't know," I said honestly.

Her face flushed and her eyes angrily flicked sidewise, then returned to the road. "I happen to be slightly in love

with you, you ugly ox!" Her chin set and she pressed down on the gas pedal.

Neither of us spoke again until the car had swept up the broad drive of El Patio and come to a smooth stop below the bronze doors.

Then she said: "Old ladies, children and dogs. How does this blonde Italian qualify? As a child or a dog?"

"Don't nag," I said.

"Are you in love with her?"

"I've known her for years."

"I didn't ask that!"

I examined her set face curiously. "I'm not in love with her."

Immediately she smiled. "I'm not jealous really. But I do like you. I have since the minute you walked in Louis' office. We'd make a good team."

"You're on a team already."

"Byron? I'll leave him tomorrow, if you want."

She looked up at me seriously and I doled her out a wary grin.

I said, "I'll think it over," stepped out of the car and let the door swing shut. "Thanks for the ride."

A small crease appeared in her forehead and her lower lip thrust out. "You're laughing at me again. I really mean it."

"I really mean I'll think it over."

She made a face, shoved the car in reverse and backed down the drive toward the highway at forty miles an hour.

It was eight minutes to nine when Greene let me through the great double doors.

"Fausta ain't down yet," he said.

"Then I'll look around Louie's office again while I'm waiting," I told him.

Wandering around the office, I noticed that whoever had cleaned up the mess Bagnell's blood made had done a thorough job. No trace remained, not even a discolored spot on the carpet. I moved on into the bathroom and pulled the light chain. I wasn't looking for anything in particular; I was just looking. Getting down on my knees, I lit a match and peered under the tub. Nothing was there except a little lint. I glanced into the tub, into the commode and then into the washbowl. The oil beads I had previously noticed still ringed the drain. I touched the brass strainer ring and it moved slightly, for it was the type that lifts out for cleaning.

I don't know whether instinct, a shadow or a slight sound warned me, but suddenly I had the impulse to duck and I obeyed it. As I threw myself backward and down, sound bellowed in the small room and the mirror over the washstand shattered, showering me with pulverized glass. Acrid smoke misted the air as I crammed myself in a tight ball between the tub and the commode. The gun thrusting between the window bars went off again. The second slug whirred around inside the bathtub like a bee in a tin can, then plunked upward into the ceiling.

With my left hand I edged the muzzle of my P-.38 over the tub's rim and pumped three shots at the window. Before the concussions stopped echoing in the tiny room, I had dived at an angle through the door. I slid along the baseboard on my stomach, jerked my knees toward my chest until I got my feet solidly planted against the wall and jackknifed my body out of the line of fire. Before my assailant could move from the bath window around the corner and pump more shots through the office window, I was out into the hall.

Mouldy Greene, an automatic in his hand, blundered into the hallway from the dining room and stopped dead when he saw me. Spinning him out of the way, I raced toward the front door. The chain lock binding together the two bronze doors delayed me, but I got it solved in fair time, took the steep entrance steps

in four leaps and loped down the drive toward the highway.

When both my legs were flesh, I was a fair runner, but aluminum had cut my speed. By the time I reached the stone pillars at the drive entrance, twin tail lights fifty yards away were beginning to move. And by the time I dropped to one knee and steadied my gun elbow on the other for an accurate tire shot, the car was seventy-five yards away. Maybe there are pistol shots who can hit a receding target at seventy-five yards in the dark, but I'm not one of them. I wasted two shots and quit.

Fausta, Gloria Horne, Mouldy Greene and Romulus all stood in the wide open doorway when I returned. Mouldy still had his gun in his fist.

"Stack it away," I said. "The shooting's over."

"What happen?" asked Fausta.

"Someone shot at me from the same spot they shot Bagnell. I shot back and missed."

Gloria asked: "Was it Amos?"

"I didn't see him," I snapped. Then I added: "Your husband didn't kill Bagnell."

I moved in toward the bar and they all trooped after me. Going behind the counter, I poured myself a straight rye and pushed the bottle toward Fausta. I got glasses from the back bar, set them next to the bottle along with mixings and said: "Mix your own."

Fausta and Gloria ignored the bottle, but Greene poured himself a double shot.

"You mean me too, mister?" asked Romulus.

Mouldy said, "Why not?" and slid the bottle toward him.

"Where's Caramand?" I asked.

Mouldy said: "Went to town."

Gloria said: "How do you know Amos is innocent?"

"He just is," I told Gloria. "It all evolves about some tire tracks and they let your husband out. You can go home. He says he won't beat you much."

Gloria looked dumbly from me to Fausta and Fausta said: "If Manny say Amos not hurt you, then Amos not hurt you. You go home."

"I'm scared."

Being shot at put me in no mood to argue with a female dunce, and I didn't really care if she ever went home. I turned my attention to Fausta. She was immaculate in a dark green evening gown and ermine jacket.

"We must be going somewhere expensive," I said.

"We go where you like."

"How about North Shore? Tonight's the opening."

Fausta's eyes narrowed. "That Byron Wade's place. You desire go there for business!"

"No," I protested innocently. "I'd like to see the place."

Gloria said: "Are you sure Amos is all right?"

I looked at her steadily. "Look. Your husband won't hurt you. Go on home."

"I haven't any way to get home."

"We'll drop you off."

I picked up the bar phone and ordered a cab. While we waited, Gloria argued with her courage, alternately deciding to go with us and changing her mind. Being indifferent, I refused further advice and after an interval of waiting for the cab to arrive, she consulted the rye bottle. Apparently its persuasive powers were greater than mine, because when the taxi arrived she climbed in as though she had not a care in the world.

Halfway to town Gloria said: "Amos will be at work. Drop me at Eighth and Market."

When she got out in front of the green glass windows of the bingo hall, Gloria peered back in at us indecisively.

"Want us to wait?" I asked.

"No. I'll be all right. Thanks."

She turned resolutely and we watched until the curtained door of the hall closed behind her.

"North Shore Club," I told the driver.

AT North Shore Club we checked our coats in the lobby and moved over to the brocaded entrance to the casino. Here we were stopped. A lone man ahead of us raised his arms while my juvenile acquaintance, Danny, patted his chest and hips before letting him enter.

I said: "Don't bother. I've got one and I'm keeping it."

Danny's yellow eyes narrowed, and I noticed the pupils were normal size. "I got orders to frisk everybody."

"I don't take orders. Tell Wade I want to see him."

He neither moved from his flat-footed position in the center of the doorway, nor bothered to say anything. I suppose he thought it was a stalemate.

I said: "Let's see if you can do it without coke," put a palm under his chin and pushed.

His arms flailed to regain balance, suddenly yielded to the laws of physics, and he sat solidly on the floor. Taking Fausta's arm, I guided her around his recumbent body. Across the room Byron Wade stood near a poker table watching the play. As we angled back and forth through the crowd toward him, I kept shooting over-the-shoulder glances back at Danny. I saw him scramble to his feet and scurry after us.

All three of us reached Wade simultaneously. Danny skidded to a stop between Wade and me, facing me with his back to Wade. His hands were thrust stiffly into his coat pockets and his face was green with rage.

Over his shoulder I said: "Evening, Wade."

Byron Wade said sharply: "Danny!"

Danny stepped back until he could see both of us, his hands still tautly in his pockets. "This guy's got a gun," he said.

I acted as though Danny were invisible. "This is Byron Wade, Fausta." Then to Wade: "Fausta Moreni."

"We met in the hall at El Patio," said Wade. He turned his head at Danny and made his eyes frost over. "Get back to the door."

Resentment and fury mixed in the expression Danny poured at me. He turned abruptly and marched back to his post.

"Have a drink?" asked Wade.

"Sure," I accepted for both of us.

He guided us to a sort of low balustrade ringing the room. The platform it edged was raised only about two feet from the main floor and the railing was punctured at intervals with gates you entered by climbing three low steps. Tables were arranged along the railing so that guests could drink and at the same time, from their slightly elevated position, obtain a good view of the gamers. We chose a table and a white-coated waiter took our order.

Fausta looked out over the crowded game room and said: "You have very good crowd for opening night."

Wade's piggy eyes swept the customers complacently. "Not bad. Of course it helps, having El Patio closed."

When our drinks arrived the waiter dangled the check uncertainly between his thumb and forefinger until Wade shook his head at him. He stuck it in his pocket and moved off.

"I should make you buy the drinks," Wade said, "after the way you threw me to Hannegan and Day."

I grinned at him. "Next time use a night club for your alibi. Know a corpse named Margaret O'Conner?"

He merely looked blank.

I said: "Never mind. Want your thousand dollars back?"

He shook his head. "That was on the level. If you thought I was trying to buy an alibi, you're way off base."

I handed him a cigar and bit off the end of another for myself. Wade fired a lighter and held the flame to my cigar first. We were being very polite to each other.

When he had tobacco burning adequately, he asked: "This a business or a pleasure call?"

"Some of both," I admitted, and drew a smoldering look from Fausta.

"It is for pleasure alone," she said. She slitted brown eyes at me. "If you come for business, we leave now."

"Be nice," I said. "This business will only take a minute." I turned back to Wade. "I have a client who wants the Bagnell case solved. Mind answering questions?"

"Depends on the questions."

Without warning he leaned forward and perspiration popped out on his brow. He overturned his chair backward and doubled across the table with one hand gripping the table edge and the other clasped to his pot belly.

"Dyspepsia," I explained to the startled Fausta. "You'll get used to it."

The attack passed almost as quickly as it started. He pulled his chair back to its former position, apologized fluently to Fausta and thrust aside his drink with an air of finality.

"The attacks are getting worse," he said. "It's to the point where I can hardly eat a thing. Just in the last couple of days, too. But I got a new patent medicine lined up . . ."

"I know," I interrupted. "You told me about it the other night. Let's get back to questions. How do you account for your wife being with Bagnell when he was shot?"

His small eyes held mine a long time before he answered. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"It isn't," I agreed. "But I'd still like an answer."

He examined the growing ash on the end of his cigar, seemed to come to a decision and met my eyes with a sudden confiding air.

"My wife's relations with me are her business and mine. But I don't want talk going around about her and Bagnell, so I'll set you straight on a few things. Eleanor and I are very happily married. But I keep her out of my business. She had no idea that Bagnell and I were rubbing against each other until she got drawn into this murder investigation. She likes to play roulette and I knew she was going to El Patio, because she tells me everywhere she goes. I saw no point in objecting to her fun just because I intended to open this place in competition to El Patio. And get this . . . She went there only for roulette. She just happened to be cashing a check in Bagnell's office when he got it. There was nothing between them."

While he spoke I saw Eleanor come from a door to the left of the bar, glance up and down the tabled balcony until she saw our party and move toward us. She had changed the sport suit of the afternoon for a black evening gown that split down the front, exposing a half-inch strip of flesh from the dog collar effect at her throat nearly to her waist. She was nearly to our table before Wade finished his confidential speech, and I could tell she caught the last two sentences.

AS SHE touched Wade's shoulder from behind, I rose and Wade looked up nervously. A peculiar embarrassed expression crossed his face. He followed my example by getting to his feet.

"Evening, hon," he said faintly. "You know these people?"

"We've met." She took a chair be-

tween her husband and me and studied the crowd in the game room. "I'd estimate three hundred," she said to Wade. "What are receipts so far?"

"I haven't checked."

Her brows raised. "It's nearly eleven. Better find out."

He rose immediately. "Sure, hon." To Fausta he said: "Excuse me, please."

As Wade departed the two women examined each other with that flat coldness which makes men's skin crawl. To break up the frigid silence I blurted the first remark I could think of.

"Must have taken some cash to put this old building back in shape."

Eleanor said: "Seventeen thousand, including the wheels."

My brain tingled with a sudden idea. "What did the whole setup cost, if you don't mind telling?"

Her eyes flicked over Fausta and settled on my face. "I don't mind telling *you* anything. Twenty-eight thousand for the property and seventeen thousand for repairs and improvements. Forty-five thousand altogether."

"That's quite an investment, if it doesn't pay off."

She shrugged. "We estimated six months to get back our capital. If El Patio stays closed, we may make it in three."

Fausta said: "El Patio will no more have the casino. Only dancing, food and drinks."

Eleanor looked past my shoulder and I turned to see Byron Wade approaching from across the gaming room. I turned back to Eleanor.

"You seem to know a lot about your husband's business."

With eyes still on her husband, her lips curled in mild contempt. "Someone has to."

As Wade rejoined our table, I excused Fausta and myself. She held my arm with unnecessary tightness as we descended the three steps to the game room.

"That woman, she make eyes at you," she said in my ear.

I said: "What do you want to play?"

"Do not change the subject."

"What do you want to play?" I repeated.

She cocked her head up at me and pouted. "Nothing. I watch you."

I am strictly a penny ante gambler. I dropped four dollars in two bets at a dice table, bought four two-bit chips and lost them at roulette, then moved on to the slot machines. Two nickels and two dimes in one-armed bandits, with no results except lemons, discouraged me.

We had started back toward our table when a voice behind us said: "Hey!"

Fausta and I turned together, and there was Gloria Horne.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Looking for you."

I piloted both women back to the table. Byron Wade and Eleanor had disappeared. I looked out over the crowd, failed to locate them and told the waiter to bring only three drinks.

"How'd you get out here?" I asked Gloria.

"Drove."

"How'd you make out with Amos?"

She looked at me as though surprised at the question. "All right," she said casually. "I have his car outside."

Fausta asked: "Amos know you come here?"

Gloria's bovine eyes were wandering over the crowd, lingering now and then on the apparently unaccompanied men. Without ceasing her deliberate examination, she said: "What he don't know won't hurt him. He doesn't get home till two."

The previous afternoon Amos Horne had said: "Look, Moon, my wife is a moron." I began to sympathize with him.

I looked at my watch, saw it was

eleven-thirty and said to Fausta: "Let's get out of here."

"I'll take you wherever you want to go," Gloria offered.

The night air had grown still and heavy, presaging rain. Half-way to town it began to drizzle and in a few minutes turned to a steady, light rain. Gloria switched on her windshield wipers.

"Seems funny not to hear that singing sound on a wet road," she remarked.

Fausta had fallen asleep on my shoulder and I was concentrating on the way tree shadows flittered across her still face. Gloria's statement failed to register immediately, then its peculiarity gradually sank in.

"What singing sound?" I asked.

"The tires. We used to have skidproofs and they made a singing sound in the rain. Amos swapped them yesterday."

I let a full minute go by while adjusting my mind to a flood of new ideas. Finally, forcing my voice to be uninterested, I asked: "Why'd he do that?"

"I don't know. I thought they were still good, but I guess he got a chance for a deal. I didn't know he'd traded till I asked for the car keys. He told me then."

I said suddenly: "Take Fausta home."

Gloria flashed me a sidewise, interested glance, but made no reply. When we reached El Patio, I gently shook Fausta awake. She yawned like a sleepy kitten, then burrowed her face in my shoulder again. "Hey!" I said. "This is home. You get off here."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Skidproof Alibi

THE RAIN gradually increased in intensity until it became a steady downpour. Gloria's driving, which was uncertain enough in clear weather, became more and more capricious. She knew only one speed—forty miles an hour—and apparently was incapable of adjusting it either up or down to suit varying highway conditions. Now she began to add to the suspense by continually throwing me side glances.

"Keep your eyes on the road," I said finally.

Dutifully she fixed her eyes straight ahead and kept them there long enough to swerve abruptly around a truck whose tail gate materialized out of the rain almost in our laps. Then her glance shifted back toward me again.

"Where we going?" she asked.

"To your place."

She drove in silence for a few moments, most of the time keeping her head turned toward me, but occasionally peering through the windshield as a gesture to indicate she still realized she was driving.

"Suppose Amos comes home?" she said.

"Suppose he does?"

She let time pass again. "He won't like it."

I made no answer and we drove the rest of the way in complete silence. Gloria continued to look sidewise at frequent intervals. In the darkness I couldn't make out her expression, but I guessed it was puzzled.

When we neared her apartment house she swung into the alley, drove headlong through the open garage door and jolted to a stop which nearly put me through the windshield. I pulled down the door for her, latched it and followed her along the dark yard at a dead run in an attempt to cheat the rain. In the lower hall we paused to regain our breaths.

Our coats were dripping wet, but underneath we were relatively dry from our necks to our knees. Below that we were both soaked.

After a short rest we climbed the stairs to apartment C. Gloria pulled the chain of a floor lamp in the living room and immediately disappeared into the bedroom. I carefully hung my coat and hat on a clothes tree near the door, where they wouldn't drip on the rug, took off my shoes and socks, rung the water from the socks and put them in my pocket, wiped the shoes out with my handkerchief and put them back on.

I was stretched flat on the sofa with my head on a pillow, when Gloria reappeared wearing a flowered housecoat.

"It's nearly one," Gloria said. "We haven't much time."

"Time for what?"

"Before Amos gets home."

"Good."

She stood in the hall doorway, her hands fidgeting with the knot holding her housecoat together and watched me puzzledly.

"I came home with you because I want to see Amos," I explained.

Her puzzlement turned to a frown, but her brain was too vapid for anger. She looked more disappointed than nettled. For a moment she examined me disapprovingly, then turned and disappeared without even a goodnight. I folded my hands across my chest and went to sleep with the light on.

The rasp of a key drawing the front door bolt brought me awake. I raised my left wrist to the level of my face, saw it was five of two and sat erect in time to see Amos Horne come into the room.

He stopped short when he saw me. "What you doing here?"

"Looking for the tires. Thought you might be able to tell me where to trade skidproofs for new synthetics."

He hung his sopping coat and hat from a peg next to mine and dug a cigarette from a box on an end table. When he had it drawing properly, he took a seat opposite me. He didn't say anything.

"Stop me if I'm wrong," I said. "Yesterday morning you got rid of four perfectly good tires and got four synthetics in trade. You made the switch because you realized the skidproofs left nice identifiable marks where you parked near El Patio."

He raised one hand to scratch the fuzz over his ear, and tried to seem undisturbed. "Who says I swapped tires?"

"Your intelligent wife. She wasn't squealing. She just doesn't know any better. Want to tell me all about things?"

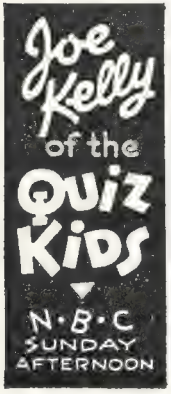
"I got nothing to tell."

I rose. "Stick around while I phone Homicide." I started toward the hall.

He rose also. "Wait a minute! You can't arrest me. You're no cop."

Gloria appeared in the hallway, still wearing her housecoat.

I said: "I'm not arresting you. I'm phoning Homicide."

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He went over to the clothes tree, lifted his hat and took his coat from under it.

"Where you bound?" I asked.

He shrugged himself into the wet coat. "You can't even detain me. You got no legal authority."

I laughed at him. "Take it off."

He put on his hat.

"How far can you walk with two broken legs?" I asked.

He looked at me belligerently, then his expression turned uncertain. He glanced at his wife, started to swell his chest with bravado, looked back at me and suddenly deflated.

I said: "Take it off."

He hung up his coat and hat again and sat down. Gloria watched placidly as I dialed the phone.

Instead of the sleepy answer I expected, a wide awake voice growled: "City police."

"This is Moon," I said.

"Moon? Manville Moon?"

"Yeah."

"Been trying to get your apartment for two hours. Hang on."

A half minute passed and then Warren Day's voice complained: "Don't you ever stay home?"

"Seldom. What got you up at two A. M.?"

"Work. We got the O'Conner thing solved."

I said: "Yeah?"

"It was an accident. Gerald Foster, the other name on the bracelet, turned up twenty miles down the river. He drifted farther, you see."

I said: "Obviously."

"They were just a couple of kids out canoeing who upset and drowned. Reason we didn't get it sooner, they lived on the Illinois side and the cops over there didn't contact us till they saw our story in the papers."

I asked: "So why are you looking for me?"

"Want to talk to you. This leaves Byron Wade wide open on the Bagnell thing again."

"Forget him," I said. "Wait till you see what I got. Send the wagon to 1418 Newberry, Apartment C." I hung up before he could ask questions.

When I returned to the living room, Amos was beginning to sweat and the fuzz over his ears stood out with static electricity from his furious rubbing.

"Look," he said. "I didn't bump Bagnell. I can explain everything."

I lifted my hat and coat from their peg. Amos started to talk rapidly, as though afraid I might cut him off before he got out the whole story.

"I got to thinking that night after I got to work, and I began to wonder if maybe Gloria might be out with Bagnell even after I warned her. So I phoned home and got no answer. That worried me more. I jumped in my car, drove here and sure enough, Gloria was gone. Naturally I got mad and decided to go yank her home. I knew where to look, but when I got near El Patio, I got cold feet and decided I'd just watch for her to come out instead of going in after her. So I parked half off the road where you found the tire tracks and just sat there. I didn't even get out of the car. After a while a siren sounded and a police car pulled into the drive right behind me. I figured the joint was getting raided, so I scrammed."

"Why the tire switch?"

"When Gloria didn't come home, I figured she got caught in the raid and was probably in jail overnight. That didn't worry me none. I figured it would serve her right." He leered at his wife in the doorway. "But when you're used to someone in the house, you don't feel comfortable without her, even if she is a moron. I couldn't sleep, so about four in the morning I turned on the radio for news. A flash about the murder came

over and right away I thought about leaving tire marks and how unusual my tread was. I didn't want to be tied up in no murder. First I thought about driving back to El Patio and rubbing out the tracks, but I was afraid I'd get caught and make it look even worse. Then I remembered the night station attendant where I buy gas offered me four synthetics about a week ago. So I climbed in my car, ran over to his place and made a deal for the switch. I had the tires changed right then, and beat it back home to bed."

"Makes a nice story," I said.

"It's the honest truth." He looked up at me earnestly.

A siren sounded in the distance and grew louder.

I said: "You can put on your hat and coat now."

IT HAD stopped raining by the time I got home at 3:00 A.M. Sleepily I pushed open my apartment door and switched on the light while still holding the key. The first thing I saw was Danny. He sat with his hat on facing me, his feet braced against the floor and both hands jammed in his coat pockets.

Even though I knew he was a coked-up psychopath and that hands-in-pockets was his melodramatic stance in preparation for a draw, he caught me off guard again. His screwball stance lulled you into a sense of security, because it looked so impossible for that obviously empty right hand to move clear to his armpit with any speed. Maybe that was the psychology.

So with my right arm straight out to the light switch, and with the key held between index finger and thumb, I stopped to ask questions instead of starting to draw.

I said: "How'd you get in?"

His right hand moved with incredible speed. It moved so fast, it was darting beneath his arm before I got around to dropping the key and starting my own hand gunward.

I might as well have saved the effort. By the time my fingers touched the butt, I was looking into the narrow bore of his target pistol.

He said tauntingly: "I thought you were supposed to be fast, *Mister* Moon."

"I probably don't sniff enough coke," I said.

His eyelids narrowed around widely dilated pupils. "That smart tongue gets you in trouble, *Mister* Moon. I'm surprised you've lived as long as you have. Turn around."

I turned around, and Danny carefully relieved me of my P-.38.

"Forward march," he said.

We went down the stairs in single file, with me leading the column. After the rain the moon had come out huge and brilliant, and as Danny prodded me up the street I began to hope someone would see us. But the streets were deserted. A half-block from my apartment we stopped next to a brand new Oldsmobile.

"Get in," Danny said.

I got in the right front seat.

"Under the wheel," Danny said.

I moved over under the wheel and Danny slipped in next to me. "Head out highway 42."

"Listen, Junior," I said. "My right leg is only good for walking. I can't drive a car."

"Use your left. This job is hydromatic. All you got to push is a brake pedal."

I said: "I haven't got a license."

"Do you want it right here?" Danny asked.

I started the car. I have driven cars with both a clutch and brake pedal and this was a snap, but I made it look difficult. I sat side-saddle with my left foot where my right should have been, and my right over in Danny's territory. At

every stop sign I tried killing the engine, but with that blamed hydromatic clutch the car practically drove itself, and I finally gave up and just drove.

When we reached the highway I asked: "This Wade's idea, or your own?"

"My own," Danny said. "Nobody pushes me around and lives to brag about it. Not even the tough *Mister* Moon."

About a mile short of North Shore Club Danny ordered me to turn off on a dirt road. The road ended suddenly at the river bank. On the principle that when you're in a spot any added confusion is a help, I pretended difficulty with the controls and kept on going for the bank. Danny spoiled my fun by cutting the ignition, and we stopped six feet short of the water.

"Get out," he said.

I got out and stood waiting. Danny centered his little .22 between my eyes.

"Don't feel put out," he said. "You're getting it from the best there is."

"The best at what?"

"With one of these." He moved the slim barrel of his gun slightly. "There isn't anybody faster. Nobody at all. And I can light a match head at twenty yards."

I said: "Remember how Houdini died? A kid hit him in the stomach when he wasn't expecting it."

In the moonlight his eyes were puzzled. "So what?"

"Any amateur can get the jump if the other guy has no warning. A ten-year-old kid could outdraw you if he just walked up and drew when you weren't expecting it."

His face turned coldly superior. "I beat you twice, didn't I? Say your prayers, *Mister* Moon."

"Gonna go back and tell the boys you beat me on the draw?" I asked.

"I did beat you on the draw."

I made my voice contemptuous. "You just surprised me. Go ahead and get it over with, Billy-the-Kid Junior."

His features pinched in sudden rage. "Why you second-rate amateur! I could give you a two-minute start and nail you before you started to move." With his left hand he pulled my P-.38 from under his belt and tossed it beyond me. "Turn around and pick it up."

I turned slowly, picked up the gun and stood waiting with my back to him.

"Put it away. Then keep your arms at your sides and turn back around."

I did as he ordered. Backing two paces, he slowly seated his Woodsman under his arm, then deliberately thrust both hands in his coat pockets.

"You start," he said.

Our eyes locked, and the certainty in his sent a tingle along my spine. All at once I knew we were going to repeat the same old routine, and I'd be touching my gun butt when his muzzle began to point at me. Only this time the tiny barrel would erupt death. Something of my knowledge must have appeared in my eyes, for his crinkled in cruel amusement.

"You start," he repeated.

I thought, *What the hell. Long as I'm going down, I might as well make it look good,* and slowly raised my hands to my coat pockets. I thrust them deep inside.

"You start," I suggested. "You're going to need more time."

His face stiffened and his eyes registered the faintest touch of uncertainty. Figuring this was the farthest he'd ever be off guard, I started my draw.

The next part of a second went by in slow motion. My hand left its pocket the barest instant before his, and reached the gun butt the barest instant after his. As our guns came out, his the narrowest part of a micro-second before mine, his face began to dissolve in panic. And as my muzzle centered on his heart, his spat

flame and a small wind whispered past my ear. Then mine was spitting flame too.

"You'd have made it," I said softly, "if you hadn't hurried your shot."

But he wasn't listening.

BY THE time I explained things to Homicide and got a begrudging release from the desk man, it was nearly 6:00 A.M. I fell into bed and lay there without stirring a hair until the apartment doorbell buzzed me awake at noon. It continued to buzz at intervals during the next five minutes, while I strapped on my leg and got a robe over my pajamas. I also took time to don slippers and eliminate my right foot's aluminum clang. By then my caller leaned steadily on the push button.

I pulled open the door and said: "O.K. I can hear you."

Eleanor Wade said: "It's about time. Were you shooing that blonde out the back?"

"A redhead," I answered grumpily.

She let her coat slide from her shoulders into a chair and raised her face to be kissed. I gave her a courtesy peck without taking my hands from robe pockets. She frowned disgustedly.

"And I called you virile!"

I said: "The redhead wore me out. I've got shaving to do. Make yourself useful while you wait. Coffee's on top of the icebox."

She examined me critically, her head on one side. "You don't look too terrible for just getting up," she decided. "That is," she explained carefully, "you don't look more terrible than usual, considering what a good start you have on looking terrible, even before you get up."

This being too complicated to follow before coffee, I went into the bathroom without answering. She trailed behind me and stood in the door while I studied my darkened cheeks in the mirror.

"You're an old bear when you get up, though. I'm not sure I'll like living with you."

I picked up my shaving brush. "The coffee's on the icebox."

She stuck out her tongue, swished her back at me and went out to the kitchen. Momentarily I concentrated on her remark about living with me, wondered whether she meant legally or in sin. But it's hard to concentrate before breakfast. A nicked ear wrenched my thoughts back to shaving.

Eleanor knew how to make coffee. By the second cup I began to be nice to her.

"So you've decided to live with me?"

"Uh huh."

"You moving in now, or just here after another report?"

"Neither. I just wanted to see you."

When we finished our coffee, Eleanor washed the pot and cups and I wiped. Afterward we repaired to the living room and I mixed dessert in a couple of tall glasses.

"Feeling virile yet?" Eleanor asked.

The question was not banter, like the sequence about living together. It was definite invitation. I felt vague annoyance, probably a hangover from some prudish ancestor. And then I felt annoyed at my annoyance, if you understand what I mean. I certainly was not shocked, and I didn't understand my irritation. Suddenly I remembered Fausta's, "Me you never invite to your flat," and my amused reaction to it. Eleanor's invitation was no more definite, but its spirit seemed different, more casual—almost routine—as though she had used exactly the same words in exactly the same tone before.

I said, "I'll tell you when," and drained my glass in one drink.

She took a cigarette from her case and had me light it for her. Leaning back, she blew smoke at me and studied my face through the haze.

"What's the matter, Manny? I say something wrong?"

"No. Why?"

"You looked gruff." She watched my face a moment more, then said: "I will have a report, after all."

I noted her glass was untouched, and mixed another drink for myself. I tasted it before speaking.

"It's more or less solved," I said.

Her glass, halfway to her lips, stopped in mid-air. "Yes?"

"Yeah."

She waited, the glass remaining suspended.

"It isn't your husband," I said.

"No?"

"It's a guy named Amos Horne. I told you about him before. The blonde's husband. The Tuesday and Thursday blonde."

The glass continued its interrupted trip and half the contents disappeared.

I said: "Remember I told you the tire tracks didn't match his tread? He's switched tires."

"Do the police have him?"

"Yeah."

She lit another cigarette from the butt of the first. "Then I owe you five hundred dollars."

I shook my head. "Not yet. Wait till it's on ice."

"I thought you said it was solved."

"I said more or less. The evidence is all circumstantial and he hadn't confessed, last I heard."

For a minute she smoked in silence. "What do you think?"

"Me? I think he did it, probably. But I've been wrong before. The evidence isn't phoney, because I gathered it myself. But I still think your husband was building an alibi the other night, and this solution leaves him out. He's clear on the O'Conner girl, too."

"I know. I read about her in the paper."

"Horne's probably the murderer, but I'm not quite satisfied. It's not a hunch, just a feeling I might go wrong. Hold your check until the cops break him down."

She said musingly: "I hope you are wrong." Her voice was soft and significant.

I felt a slight chill. "You've hoped it was Byron all along, haven't you?"

She nodded, then quickly drained her glass.

"That's really why you hired me, isn't it? You hoped I'd pin it on your husband."

She nodded again without hesitation.

"Why so eager to get rid of him? Bagnell didn't mean that much to you."

She pursed her lips and watched me thoughtfully a long time before speaking, as though solving a problem in her mind. "Are you fond of me?" she asked finally.

"Sure," I said, surprised.

"Do you love me?"

It was my turn to think. I shook my head. "Love is too big a word. I get scared."

She didn't seem disappointed. "But you do like me?"

"Sure."

"A lot?"

"A lot," I conceded. "What about it?"

"I'm going to tell you why I really hired you."

I didn't say anything.

"Because the minute I saw you, I wanted to leave Byron and be with you. Before, I was content to stay married to him and go where I pleased, but you did something to me. I wanted to get rid of him altogether."

I felt vaguely embarrassed. "Why not poison him? It's cheaper."

"I will," she said flippantly, "if you want." Her face smiled, but her eyes were serious.

I rose and picked up her coat. "This

is a silly conversation. Let's go out and get some air."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Dice-table Ghost

THE day was brisk, but a lazy sun was beginning to take the edge from the air. Eleanor drove desultorily, drifting down one street and up another in aimless fashion. Neither of us felt much like talking, particularly me, because I was fitting together some unpleasant ideas which were beginning to form in my mind. Superimposed on these ideas I unexpectedly got the impression that there was plan behind the seemingly purposeless driving. And as Eleanor's aimless turnings brought us closer and closer to the highway leading past El Patio, I grew sure of it.

Eventually a side street spewed us out on the main road. Eleanor turned in the direction away from town and increased the car's speed.

Although I knew, as we neared El Patio I asked: "Where we going?"

El Patio's stone pillared gates came in sight and Eleanor slowed the car. "Let's stop for a drink."

"It's closed."

"Your blonde friend will let us in."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself. But lots of places that are open serve drinks."

She swung the car between the stone gateposts and brought it to a stop next to the building's front steps. We left it parked there instead of driving back to the lot.

Vance Caramand let us in when I pounded on the big bronze doors.

"Fausta around?" I asked.

"Shopping in town." He closed the door behind us and walked off, leaving us to our own devices.

Mouldy Greene and Romulus sat at a table near the bar playing gin rummy.

I said: "How about a couple of drinks?"

"Help yourself," Mouldy said.

Going behind the counter, I found a bottle of rye and plunked it in front of Eleanor.

"There a tray back there?" she asked.

I looked. "Yeah. Why?"

"Put some glasses and things on it and we'll take it back to Louis' office."

The suggestion didn't startle me. I almost expected it. I began to feel as though we were acting out a play that had been rehearsed, and were responding to each other's cues, knowing in advance what was to happen next.

I asked: "Why?"

"We can talk privately there."

"With the ghost of your ex-lover looking on?"

She pouted. "Don't be common."

"O.K.," I shrugged. "If the association doesn't bother you, it won't me."

I slapped the tray on the bar, set the rye, a jug of water, a siphon, two glasses, a spoon and an empty bowl on it. Emptying a shelf of ice cubes in the bowl, I picked up the complete equipment and followed Eleanor back to Bagnell's office. I sat behind Bagnell's desk and mixed two drinks while Eleanor perched on the desk edge and swung her feet.

"Satisfy your morbid curiosity?" I asked.

"The drink?"

"The atmosphere."

She said: "I don't see why you're acting so silly about coming back here. Louis Bagnell was nothing to me."

"I'm not acting silly. I'm just trying to figure out why."

"Why what?"

"Why you wanted to come here."

Setting down her drink, she looked down at me puzzledly from her elevated position. "I didn't insist, you know. It was just a spur of the moment idea. If you don't like it, we'll leave."

"I don't like it."

She frowned in annoyance. "What's the matter with you?"

"It wasn't a spur of the moment idea. You meant to come here from the moment we left my place. Why?"

"You're being silly." She took a long drink and left her nose up in the air after she lowered the glass.

The desk telephone caught my eye and I lifted the receiver and dialed Homicide. Eleanor watched me from her eye corners, but she wasn't giving me the satisfaction of indicating interest. I got Hannegan on the phone.

"Moon," I said. "How's Horne doing?"

"Just started to work on him," Hannegan told me. "We closed shop, once he was safe in jail, and the inspector and I both slept till noon. The inspector's talking to Horne now."

"Good. I'm at El Patio. Will you ring me back after Day goes over him?" I read him the number from the phone's dial plate.

"Sure," said Hannegan.

When I hung up the phone, Eleanor said: "Mix me another drink."

"I thought you weren't speaking to me."

"I'm not, except as a bartender."

I put together two more drinks and leaned back in the desk chair to enjoy mine. Just as I started to raise the glass, the office door crashed back against the wall and Fausta, her eyes sputtering like a shorted neon sign, stood in the doorway.

"So!" she hissed.

"So what?" Eleanor snapped right back at her.

Fausta prowled dramatically into the room. "To my own house you bring him, you—you shewolf!" She stopped in front of Eleanor and bared her teeth.

Eleanor said: "Get away from me, blondie, or I'll bat your brains out."

Easing out of my chair, I circled toward the door around the side of the desk opposite the two women.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll be at the bar. Let me know how things turn out."

Fausta spun on me. "You, Manny Moon! Why you bring this woman here where I am?"

"I'll be at the bar."

"Wait, Manny." All at once her voice was contrite. "I be good."

I paused in the doorway. "Yeah?" I said cautiously.

"You think I act bad to make scene?"

"Yes. Very bad."

"You desire I go leave you alone?"

"Yes."

Her expression turned forlorn. Slowly she moved to the door and stopped next to me. Turning her head over her shoulder, she looked sorrowfully at Eleanor. Then her face screwed up, her tongue shot out at Eleanor and at the same time she gouged a sharp heel into my one good shin.

"Ow!" I yelled, but before I could grab her, she was flitting down the hall toward the dining room.

LIMPING back into the room, I got my foot on a chair and began to rub my shin cautiously.

"Little brat," I growled.

Eleanor came over and kissed me behind the ear. "Don't mind, Manny. I'm all the woman you need."

Continuing on around me, she went toward the bathroom. I noted that the eternal oversized bag was clutched tightly beneath her arm. When I heard the bolt slide to, I quickly but softly moved to the bathroom door and pressed one ear against the panel. I heard her fumbling at the washbowl, and the clash of metal on porcelain. Then the phone rang. I cut it off in the middle of its second ring.

"Yeah?" I said.

"El Patio?"

"Yeah."

"Manville Moon there?"

"Speaking."

"Hannegan. We've been going over Horne and he admits everything you told us, but still won't break on the actual killing. Insists he never got out of the car."

"I never said he did."

Hannegan was silent for a long time. "Jeepers creepers!" he said finally. "No wonder the old man hates you!"

"How long was he parked?"

"He says about an hour. Seven-thirty to eight-thirty."

I thought a moment. "That covers the time from before the murder until after the cops arrived. Did you ask him if anyone else entered the grounds while he was there?"

"Yeah. He said no one could without his seeing it, and he didn't see anyone."

I said: "I'll phone you back in a few minutes," and hung up just as Eleanor came from the bathroom.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Hannegan, reporting nothing new. Horne denies the killing."

I walked over to her, put a hand on either shoulder and looked down into her face. She raised her lips to be kissed.

I said: "Close your eyes."

Obediently her eyes closed, and I dropped my left hand over the edge of the purse held beneath her arm. My right palm transferred to her right shoulder, pushed, spinning her sidewise so that I was literally left holding the bag. Taking two backward steps, I sat on the desk top, holding the purse in my lap with both hands.

She came at me quickly and I raised one foot, letting her run against the sole and at the same time drawing back my knee to cushion the contact. She came to a gentle, but firm stop with my foot pressed into her stomach.

Her eyes stared into mine stonily. "Give me my purse!"

I said: "If I straighten my leg fast, you'll end up across the room."

I straightened it slowly and steadily. She gave ground until my leg was out straight, then impatiently stepped back another step and brushed a palm across her stomach. I kept my eyes on her as I unzipped the purse. She watched unwinkingly as I removed the Army .45 and laid it beside me on the desk.

"I thought this was only for roulette nights," I said.

She didn't say anything.

I laid a cigarette case, a lighter, a small flask, a pen and checkbook, a lipstick and a handkerchief beside the gun, keeping my eyes on her face all the time and locating each item by touch. In the bottom of the bag I felt what I was looking for.

I brought out the squat metal tube and dropped my eyes to it. It was a spare barrel for a .45 automatic, with a thin wire looped around one end.

Eleanor asked: "How long have you known?" She made it a simple question with no particular emotion.

"I got a glimmer last night when you showed too much knowledge of your husband's business. But I couldn't see any possible way you could have done it, and when everything began to point to Horne so neatly, I stopped thinking about you. Then your desire to get back here today convinced me there was something here you had to get. You rang me in because you needed an excuse to come here and didn't know Fausta well enough to just barge in. But I still wasn't sure until a minute ago when Hannegan told me Horne saw no one enter the grounds. Even then I hadn't the faintest idea how you did it."

"Do you know now?"

I nodded. "The extra barrel. Your interesting soldier friend with the gun collection probably gave it to you. I should have thought of that. I found dozens of broken guns in combat, in wrecked planes and burned out tanks. And sometimes I'd build a good one out of the salvageable parts of several. Your friend probably did the same thing, only he kept the leftover parts. How many extra barrels did he give you?"

"Two."

"So you still have enough for one more murder."

Her face flushed, but she made no reply.

"When you came to see Bagnell," I continued, "your gun was equipped with a full clip and an extra shell in the chamber. In your purse you also had the extra barrel and this little piece of wire with a hook on one end and a loop on the other. After drinking and necking a while, you decided to go to the bathroom. You left the door open and filled the washbowl with cold water. That served a double purpose, didn't it? No man, even a wolf like Bagnell, is going to look toward an open bathroom door while a woman inside is running water.

"You must have dropped to one knee to get the correct gun level before you shot him. Then you field stripped the gun. I can field strip an Army automatic in fifteen seconds. You probably practiced until you were at least that good. You dropped the hot barrel in the washbowl and reassembled the gun with the other barrel. By the time the automatic was back in your purse, apparently unfired and with a full clip, the other barrel was cool enough to handle without the black leather gloves you so conveniently wore.

"You let out the water, lifted the removable strainer, hung the barrel from it by means of your little wire and reinserted it so the barrel was out of sight down the drain. With previous practice you could do all that in less than two minutes. And the only visible evidence was a few drops of oil in the bowl, which I never figured out.

"Then you went back into the office and spread yourself on the floor in apparent faint until Greene and Caramand broke in. You made a mistake there, though. Your spotless dress puzzled me because the floor was spattered with blood. You carefully didn't lie in any, but later realized you should have and told me you'd been splashed. How'd you get rid of the spent shell?"

"Flushed it down the drain."

I sat swinging my feet and turning the gun barrel over and over in my hands. She continued to watch me, her face just as expressionless as it had been from the beginning.

Finally she said: "You had to know, of course."

I raised my eyes inquiringly.

"I'd have told you eventually if you hadn't found out. I've thought about it a lot and tried to figure out some way not to tell you, but I couldn't. I had to, in order to carry out the rest of the plan, and if I didn't, killing Louis was wasted."

I frowned and continued to look puzzled.

"You realize now, I suppose," she went on, "that I'm the organizing brains behind Byron. He's nothing but front, but he's been necessary because the organization wouldn't take orders from a woman. He didn't even know Louis was going to die. I just told him to have all the boys get perfect alibis and to drop in on you for his own. I wanted to be sure you'd be dragged into the case because, you see, I'd picked you to succeed Byron."

I stared at her blankly while her calm voice pursued the explanation.

"The O'Conner girl's body showing up

was pure coincidence. Neither Byron nor I ever heard of her. Louis had to die because no one in his organization was strong enough to wear his shoes, and his death left the town wide open for us. But when things settle down, outside gangs are going to realize the pickings here and start moving in to take over. Anyone of them could take the town from Byron."

I twisted the barrel some more and waited for her to go on. She moved a step nearer me.

"You've got a reputation," she said softly. "No out-of-town mob is going to buck you any more than they bucked Bagnell."

"What happens to Byron?"

"He dies of dyspepsia."

I thought about this for a minute. "So it's induced dyspepsia," I said slowly, and suddenly remembered Byron's retaining me to solve his murder "in case it happened."

I said: "I wouldn't make a good substitute for Byron. I don't take orders from women."

"I'll take orders from you. Don't you know I'm in love with you?"

"Sure," I said. "That's why you pumped bullets at me through the bathroom window."

She stopped moving toward me and flushed slightly. "I was only scaring you away from the bowl. I'd have hit you if I really meant it."

I threw a twisted grin at her. "Didn't you say Byron had your first husband killed? That must have been before you started having his ideas for him. Do I get murdered by another successor in a couple of years?"

She stood very straight and her face lifted haughtily. Without turning, I reached sidewise and picked up the phone. I drew it into my lap and dialed a number.

"Who you phoning?"

I smiled at her. "Hello," I said. "Put on Lieutenant Hannegan."

She started toward me, her fingers spread for clawing and lips pulled tautly back from her teeth. I let her get close, stuck my metal foot in her stomach and pushed.

She was sitting on the floor, her pupils dilated like an animal's, when Hannegan came to the phone.

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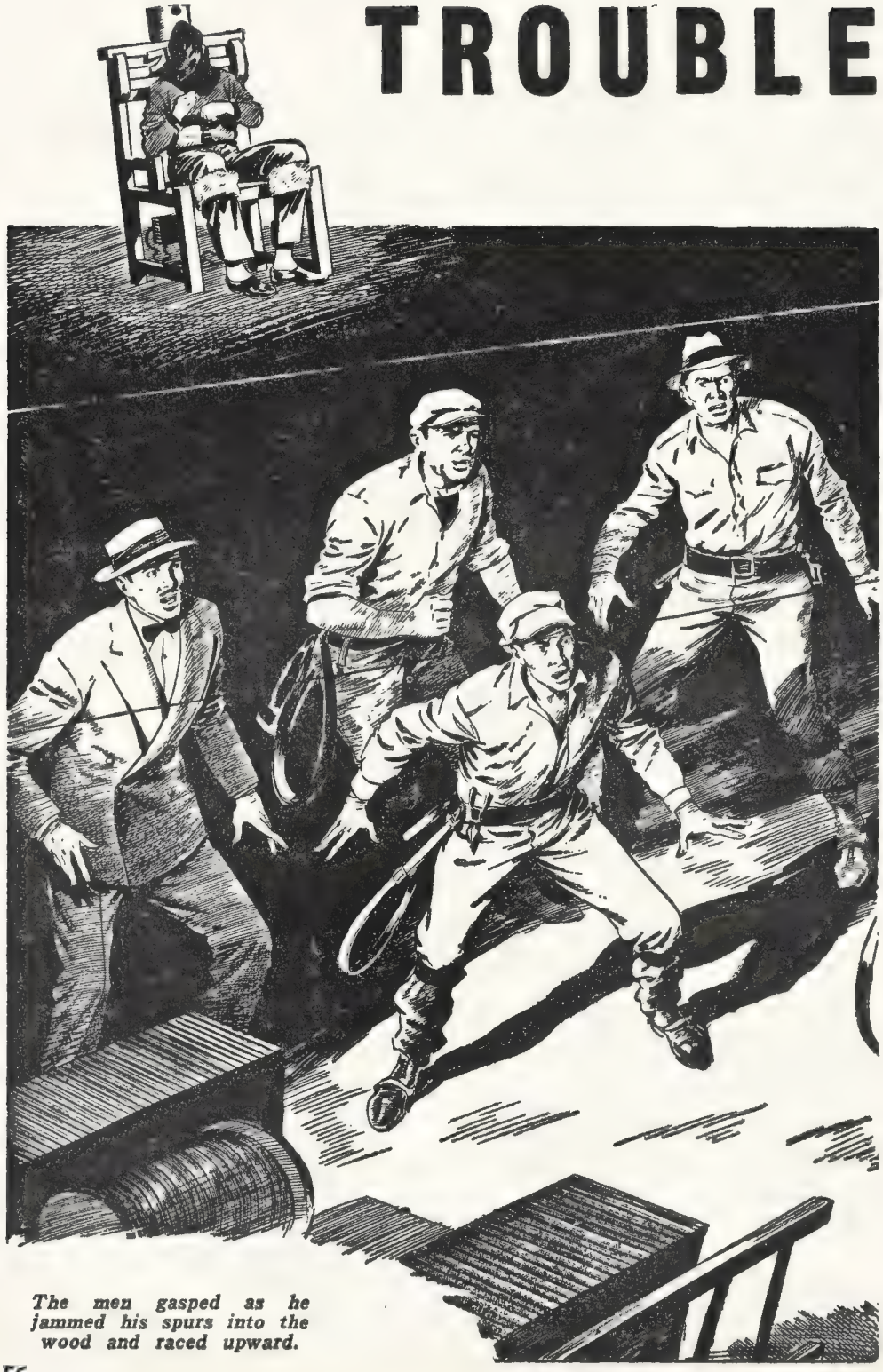
# TROUBLE



*The men gasped as he jammed his spurs into the wood and raced upward.*

# ON CIRCUIT 13

By

**ROBERT J. McCAIG**

**Marty Cullane was an old hand at handling high voltage. Nobody ever expected he'd get his wires crossed and find himself headed straight for the hot seat.**

AS THE chime whistle of the locomotive mourned down the velvet tunnel of the night, the few passengers in the day-coach swayed limply to the motion of the train. Slumped in one of the red plush seats, Johnny Cullane looked as somnolent as the rest. But behind the blankness of his boyish, dark-tanned face, Cullane's mind was racing over the same set of facts with which it had been struggling for two days. Now, a scant hour from the city of Marston, his long, wiry body bone-weary from a thousand sleepless miles, he was no nearer a plan to help Marty than when he had boarded the train in Camar. And Marty needed help desperately.

The story was too incomplete. That awkward, scrawled letter datelined "Marston" had been so short that Johnny Cullane could recall every word of it:

*Dear Sŏn.*

*You was right, I did get in a jam and a bad one. I ain't calling for help, it's too late. Should of let you know sooner but I guess I was too proud. But I want to tell*

*you to keep out of it son, don't come here. I don't want you tangled up in this ugly mess.*

*Anyways I am in the Marston jug and they are sending me to the electric chair Aug. 15 for killing a fellow named Carl Hawke the city foreman for Northern Hydro. Maybe I done it, I was drunk and don't remember. I don't think I did. The jury thought so though, and it was sure somebody in the line crews.*

*It's my own fault. Like you warned me I hit the booze once too often I guess. So stay away Johnny and just say a prayer or two for*

*Your loving dad,*
*Martin Cullane.*

*P.S. It's a funny way for an old lineman to go after dodging the juice all these years, ain't it? Ha-ha!*

*Marty.*

Johnny Cullane's face twisted with pain. The letter was so like Marty, even to the pitiful touch of bravado at the end. It was because he knew his father's character so well, that he was coming to Marston in spite of Marty's plea.

He simply couldn't picture Marty as a cold-blooded killer. Marty might get drunk and beat hell out of a man with his fists in a fair fight, but murder! It was incredible, and Johnny didn't believe it.

The speeding train racketed over a bridge, and Johnny looked out into the blackness. Then he slumped back in his seat, thinking of the trails he and Marty had traveled together. Since his mother's death when he was twelve, he had been with Marty constantly, except for the past year. And in thirteen years Johnny had come to know every facet of his father's character.

JOHNNY could see him now—big, kindly, generous to a fault. He was an expert in his trade of linework, well liked by everyone wherever he went. Sure he was a boomer, and certainly he had the typical boomer failing—the periodical drunk. But drunk or sober, Marty was not a killer.

Like the montage in a motion picture, scenes of their life together flashed through Johnny's mind. His father's pride when Johnny first donned the hooks of a lineman at seventeen; his warnings during the later period when Johnny was certain that he was the cattiest lineman who ever topped a cedar stick; an angry Marty shouting down the young doctor who wanted to amputate Johnny's burned foot after a flaming jolt of 3800 volts in a sleet-swept Montana night had cured Johnny forever of overconfidence.

The scars and slight limp from that accident kept Johnnny out of the service during the war, and Johnny remembered Marty, with patient argument bringing him out of his mood of sullen resentment. After that the pair went to building power lines for the clamoring war industries, the Skalkaho highline, the Coulee towers, the "Paul Bunyan" 220,000. At the end of the war they were still together.

Their later ramblings brought them to the neat, homelike city of Camar, and jobs with the power company there. For the first time, the long, lonesome road began to lose its fascination for Johnny. Maybe it was the town itself, maybe it was because he met a girl, maybe he was just growing up. But Johnny began to feel a sense of belonging, and found himself ready to settle down for good.

To Marty, Camar was just another hick town. He stood it for two months, and then he was ready to pull the pin and blow. But this time, Johnny demurred. In the hot argument which followed, they both flung angry words they didn't mean until neither could back down. So Marty Cullane pulled out of Camar on a northbound train, alone, with a pint on his hip and a couple of fifths in his keister, heading for nowhere.

Johnny felt like a heel for staying, and during the following year, he wor-

ried about Marty. When no word of him came to Camar, Johnny made himself believe that the lack of news meant his dad was keeping out of trouble. But the shock of Marty's letter when it finally arrived brought Johnny's new life down in shattered wreckage. That night he was on his way to Marston.

"Marston!" the conductor shouted over the train noise. Johnny Cullane snapped out of his reverie. Stiffly, he stood up, and dragged his battered suitcase from the rack.

As he stood waiting to get off, Johnny felt a pang of hopelessness at the thought of what lay before him. His vague plan was to get a job with Northern Hydro, and go on from there. Now all he could do was square his shoulders and prepare to meet the challenge.

The next morning, Johnny Cullane left his hotel and went to the public library. Requesting the back files of the Marston *Chronicle*, Johnny began to read intently. As he followed the reports of the Hawke murder and the subsequent trail of Marty Cullane, his discouragement grew. For the law appeared to have an ironclad, open-and-shut case against Marty.

According to the paper, Cullane had clashed with Carl Hawke from the day Cullane had gone to work for Northern Hydro. The testimony pictured Hawke as hot-tempered and overbearing, and when he had criticized Cullane's work, Cullane had retorted with comments on Hawke's worth as a supervisor. In the face of Hawke's hostility, only Cullane's ability, in a period of manpower shortage, had kept Cullane on the payroll.

Cullane had taken a kid lineman under his wing. Chet Rainey was green, but willing to work and eager to learn. Johnny, reading of Marty's protege, knew Marty had been trying to fill the void left by Johnny's absence.

At once Hawke had begun bulldozing the kid, piling dirty jobs on him, in an indirect attack on Marty. Then one wicked August night, when lightning was ripping the system apart, Hawke had sent Rainey out on trouble, into a complicated mess of circuits which might have puzzled even an old head. The kid had made one mistake, a power arc had blazed and crackled, and Chet Rainey was dead.

THE next day Marty, raging, had accused Hawke of killing the boy. Hawke had laughed, cruelly, until Marty Cullane's big fist stopped him. In the ensuing fight the foreman, younger than Marty and just as big, had given Cullane a bad beating. A number of witnesses agreed that Marty had sworn he would "get" Hawke.

That night, another storm brought the crews out on overtime, Hawke directing operations from the shop. A crew, returning from a job, found him beaten to death, his skull crushed in. In a storeroom they found Marty Cullane unconscious, and nearby a bloody pair of lineman's pliers bearing Cullane's initials and fingerprints. He was immediately arrested for murder.

The trial had seemed fair enough. Cullane took a fatalistic attitude, appearing uninterested in the witnesses or the exhibits placed in evidence. On the stand, his only defense was that he had been drunk, didn't remember killing Hawke, but didn't think he had done it.

It was no surprise, in the face of the evidence, when the jury came in after only half an hour, with a verdict of guilt in the first degree. The judge sentenced Marty Cullane to death.

Now, late in July, the sentence still stood unchanged. The execution, Johnny learned, would be in Marston, for in this state, the law required the penalty to be

paid in the county where the murder took place. A portable electric chair owned by the state would be brought to Marston and on August fifteenth Marty Cullane would take his last walk—through a corridor of the county jail.

Johnny Cullane went back to his lonely room, heartsick with his new knowledge. As he sat chain-smoking cigarettes, he could see no loophole in the case. Assuming, even now, that Marty was innocent, the only hope was that the murderer had been someone in the line crews. Was he still in Martson? If so, there was a faint chance that where trained police officers had failed, Johnny's knowledge of the trade and the men who worked in it might bring out evidence they had missed.

So to the offices of Northern Hydro went Johnny Cullane. When the division superintendent learned that Johnny was a qualified lineman, he almost locked the door until he had Johnny safely signed up. He even waived the physical exam. Johnny was nervous as he handed the clerk his Social Security and union cards, for the gap between "John R." and Lane", and the blurred "L" he had capitalized, appeared so obvious. But the clerk made no comment as he filled out the identification slip. The first hurdle was past, and "John R. Lane" was on the payroll of Northern Hydro.

Johnny arrived early at the shop the next day, and checked in with the shop steward. Again his altered papers passed without question. He knew that the union or the Social Security Board would catch up with him in a month or so, but by that time it wouldn't matter. The gamble would be won or lost.

Grizzled Mort Williams, the city foreman, was pleased when he learned of Johnny's wide experience. He put him with a five-man crew, shifting distribution circuits. It was just another job to Johnny, but when they stopped for a smoke in the middle of the morning, he could see that Jack Potter, the subforeman, was well satisfied.

"Sure glad to get a real lineman this time, Lane, instead of the 'clumb-somes' they've been sending me," Potter remarked.

"Pretty tough getting men out here?"

"They come and go. Out of twenty four men working from this shop, I'll bet not more'n a dozen been here over a year."

Johnny's heart sank. Chances were the killer was long gone.

"Yeah," continued Potter, "Even the city foreman, Willams, is new. The Company brought him in from Corinth after Hawke got bumped off a year or so ago. You hear about that?"

"Some," admitted Johnny, cautiously. "What's the real story?"

"A boomer lineman, name of Cullane, bashed Hawke's skull in with a pair of pliers. Cullane's sitting in the county clink now, waiting for the hot seat in a couple weeks. Hell of a swell guy, too."

"How come he conked him?"

"Cullane claimed Hawke practically murdered a kid lineman named Rainey. It was just about true, too. It was only a matter of time before Hawke, the so-and-so, got his from somebody."

"Sounds like this Hawke was an ornery cuss."

"Ornery? He was meaner'n a bear with a sore tail! An' a greedy, no-good louse! F'r instance, it didn't come out at the trial, but Hawke was working the old six-for-five game. You know, I'll lend you five, you pay me back six on payday. If you didn't kick through, Hawke raised the ante higher. He had some of the boys in pretty deep. Yeah, Hawke was tight as hell. Pretty near as tight as Smoky Storrs."

"Smoky Storrs? Who's he?"

"One of the linemen; you'll meet him.

Smoky would skin out a bedbug for the hide and tallow, if somebody would loan him a knife. Well, let's hit 'er again."

IN A few days, Johnny Cullane had quite a catalogue of information on members of the Northern Hydro crews. One afternoon, he got permission from Williams to knock off early. At the city office, he looked up the superintendent's clerk. It wasn't difficult to obtain from him the names of the remaining men who had been employed at the time of the Hawke murder. As he thanked the clerk, he noticed it was almost five o'clock. On a hunch, he invited the man out for a glass of beer.

A mention of Hawke started the clerk talking. Johnny noted one bit of information in particular.

"You know, Lane, just the mention of murder seems to scare people silly. For instance, I happen to know that Ray Dent gave a fake alibi for the time of the Hawke killing. Now Ray's harmless, wouldn't hurt a fly, so in my book he just got panicky. But it goes to show how screwy people get where murder is concerned!"

But in spite of the clerk's assurance, the name of Ray Dent was marked with a double star on the list Johnny compiled when he got back to his room.

As the execution date came remorselessly nearer, it wasn't difficult to bring up the Hawke murder in conversation. By a few careful questions, plus quiet examination of the operating records, Johnny Cullane eliminated from his list eleven of his fourteen names. These men had certainly been out on the job at the time of the murder. Three remained, Van Heming, who claimed he was at a movie, Smoky Storrs, supposedly alone on an all-out call, and Ray Dent. Johnny checked on Dent first.

Learning that Dent's wife was out of town, Johnny wangled an invitation to spend an evening with the electrician. He took along a couple of steaks, and after dinner, Dent brought up the Hawke case himself.

"You know, Lane, a man pulls some dam' fool stunts. I pretty near got myself jammed up in that deal. If the cops had caught up with me, whew!"

"What did you do, Ray?" Johnny tried to keep his voice casual.

"Well, I was out on a poker party that night with the boys, and they took me for thirty bucks. Now the Missus don't think any more of thirty bucks than she does of her right eye, so when the cops asked me where I was, I thought of my old lady, shivered a little, and says I was visiting friends in South Marston. I'd been there a couple nights before, see, and when the cops checked, these folks got their dates mixed. Boy, did I shake for a couple of days! Because if I'd had to go to the boys for an honest alibi, to clear me with the cops, I would have had to move in with Cullane to dodge the Missus!"

As Johnny left, he stopped under a street lamp and crossed off the name of Ray Dent. The story had the ring of truth.

Smoky Storrs proved more difficult to stalk. Storrs was a small, saturnine lineman of indeterminate age, whose devotion to the non-expenditure of money was an obsession. This trait drew constant ribbing from the other workmen. Johnny figured that Storrs' miserliness would provide the best approach. But as he sought an opportunity, the time limit had shortened to mere days. Soon there would be only hours left to find a means of saving Marty.

The strain on Johnny Cullane was terrific. He had to go on with his work, and he did it well. Yet the load of anxiety was growing on him, and he felt a constant urge to visit Marty, if only

for a few minutes, anything to give Marty a ray of hope. But contact with Marty would force Johnny out into the open, and he didn't want that as long as there was a vestige of a chance left.

Smoky Storrs was alone as usual at that week's brief union meeting. As the other men left by twos and threes, Johnny walked over to Storrs.

"Come on, I'll buy a drink, Smoky," he invited.

He could see Storrs fearfully considering the necessity of buying back, so Johnny clinched it.

"It's on me, Smoky. A guy mailed me twenty-five bucks I never expected to see again. Let's blow it in."

In a few minutes they were seated in a bar. Two hours later Storrs, who had been taking full advantage of this rare opportunity, was getting glassy of eye and thick of tongue. Johnny, who had ducked several rounds, decided the time was ripe.

"Well, next week they burn that tough guy, Cullane, eh, Smoky? Say, weren't you around the night Hawke got killed?"

Storrs stared at him owlishly.

"Sure, Lane, an' s'my opinion that C'lane done a good job. That Hawke wash dirty crook if I ever seen one."

"They say you got back right afterwards, Smoky."

"Yeah, I come back, there's Hawke layin' on floor, blood all over, head bashed in with a pair of Cranes. Whole shop's filled with cops, and they say, 'Smoky ole boy, ole boy, where was you?' I tell 'em—I'm at Mizz Olson's, down inna cellar, tryin' to fix the lights. I tell 'em 'Call the lady up, go ahead, call the lady up.' So they do, and then they take Cullane to the jailhouse. Good ole Mizz Olson, sheventeen twenny four Wish—Wish—Wishtaria Drive."

Storrs pounded his empty glass on the table.

"Mishter Cullane, he's gonna burn, gonna burn Mishter Cullane. Mishter Cullane he's—"

Johnny snapped an order to the waiter, ending this gruesome litany. Two more drinks put the freeloader into a state of coma, and Johnny bundled him in a cab and sent him home.

During the noon hour the next day, Johnny found a telephone and called Mrs. Olson. Pretending to be a reporter from the *Chronicle*, he checked Storrs' alibi.

"Yah, he vas here. I told the police twenty times already, I bet."

Disappointed, Johnny crossed Storrs' name off his list. Much as the little lineman disgusted him, Storrs appeared to be out of the picture. That left only Heming.

HEMING proved elusive, and by Sunday, the thirteenth, Johnny still had been unable to pin him down. Feeling the last shoddy strings of the search slipping through his fingers, he called Heming's home. Informed that Heming had just left for the movie at the Crown Theater, Johnny went downtown and prowled the avenue until the show crowd came out. Spotting Heming with a girl, he followed them at a distance until Heming unlocked his parked car. As Heming came around the front of the car, Johnny speeded his pace.

"Why, hello, Heming!"

"Hello, Lane, where are you heading?"

"Home, I guess, nothing much to do."

"Come on, I'll give you a ride. We just got out of the show."

Johnny got in the back seat of the sedan, and Heming introduced him to the girl. Johnny asknowledged the introduction and then asked: "How was the picture?"

"Oh, quite a thriller," replied the girl.

"One of those murder mysteries. They always give me a shiver, because I think of the time we came out of one and walked right into a real murder case!"

"We were at the show the night Hawke was killed," Heming explained.

"Yes, and because the lights had gone out once in the theater, we drove past the shop. Van wanted to see if there was line trouble. We saw the police cars and the ambulance so Van went in. The big bully made me stay in the car."

"You should be glad you did, baby," retorted Heming. "I didn't have any use for Carl Hawke, but I never want to see another man with his brains spilled all over a concrete floor."

"Van, you brute!" squealed the girl. "Let's talk about something pleasant."

Heming let Johnny out at the hotel, and Johnny went wearily upstairs. In his room, he glanced through his notebook once more, then ripped it viciously across. Hell of an amateur detective he was! He had been so sure that somewhere in that list would be the name of the killer of Carl Hawke. Well, tomorrow he would wash his hands of the whole futile business and go to see Marty.

But the next morning, strangely, he woke with new hope and a dogged conviction that there was something he had missed. A motive ugly enough for murder must have deep roots. If he had more time, just a little more time. . .

Then as he read the morning *Chronicle's* account of the coming execution, he found two short paragraphs which snapped him wide awake. With mounting excitement, he found a sure-fire plan forming itself in his mind. There *was* a chance to gain that time.

He read the paragraphs again, carefully: "Sheriff Bell, who has never performed an execution, appeared grim and nervous when interviewed by a member of the *Chronicle* staff. Bell stated that he will hold off the execution until the final minutes of Tuesday, in case of a reprieve. Thus it is unlikely that Martin Cullane will walk the 'last mile' before 11:30 P.M. tomorrow.

"On this point, Sheriff Bell is at odds with District Attorney Charles Perry. According to Perry, if the equipment should fail, preventing the execution before midnight, it would take at least a week to obtain a court order resetting an execution date. Sheriff Bell, however, is determined to allow Cullane the fullest possible time permitted by law."

Johnny Cullane smiled grimly, tossed the paper aside, and went to work.

That night, Johnny stayed for a while at the shop after the other workmen had left. He studied certain parts of the circuit diagram until he knew them by heart. Later, he strolled slowly past the county jail in downtown Marston. What he saw pleased him greatly. Mentally going over all the details of his plan, he found it good. Of course, it meant cutting things pretty fine, but that couldn't be helped.

Tuesday dawned hot and sultry. Its minutes and hours dragged interminably. Johnny, thinking of Marty suffering his last hours alone and friendless, was jittery with strain. During the noon hour, when the gang tried to draw him into the usual bull session, Johnny was preoccupied and silent.

At last they managed to badger him into a brief defense of the Sure-Grip pliers he used. Marty had extolled their advantages to him so often that Johnny had good reasons. But Jack Potter squelched him: "Aw, nuts, Johnny, the proof is in popularity. Out of twelve line men here, you and Smoky Storrs are the only ones that use 'em. The rest of us stick to Cranes!"

The whistle started the afternoon on its lagging way, then, suddenly, it was five o'clock. Johnny changed clothes

and left as usual, not taking the tools essential to his plan. He did not dare take chances of discovery at this perilous stage.

He bolted his supper untasted, while avidly reading the evening paper. He was gratified to find that Sheriff Bell was stubbornly maintaining his announced stand. Marty Cullane still had a few precious hours of life left. Returning to his room, Johnny paced restlessly until eight o'clock then headed for the Northern Hydro shop.

As he neared the building, he was startled from his dark thoughts by the spatter of raindrops. Looking up, he saw black clouds racing across the sky, and heard the low mutter of thunder in the west. Gloom obscured the twilight, and the air was tense and heavy. Hurrying his steps, he entered the shop.

The night troubleman looked at him in surprise.

"You here already, Lane? We didn't get the first trouble call until a few minutes ago."

"I just happened by. Why, is there a bad one coming?"

"Looks like it from reports down the line. Williams is calling all the crews out. They say she's going to be hotter'n a firecracker. One circuit out in the West End already, so you'd better get your climbin' clothes on."

Johnny hurried to his locker to change clothes, his mind racing to rearrange his plan to fit the new conditions. The storm would help, not hurt, so by the time Williams arrived, Johnny Cullane was all ready to hit the sticks.

The men began straggling in, and they didn't have long to wait. The storm was rushing nearer, and thunder began to roll and boom. Across town, a flaming lance of fire slashed the angry sky with a vicious, deafening crash. The phone rasped with orders from the load dispatcher, and the heavy gang rolled toward Circuit 34. Then the all-outs began pouring in, and crews raced to reach the trouble spots.

JOHNNY was sent out with two men to change a burned-out bug in the East End, and in an hour he was back at the shop with the damaged transformer. The calls kept coming in, though the aerial artillery began to show signs of slackening. Coming in from a short job, Johnny hung around, getting more and more nervous as ten o'clock passed.

Finally he could wait no longer. If he were to get away by himself he would have to plead illness and check out. He started toward Williams' little office. As he got there, the foreman slammed up the phone.

"Lane, just the man I want. Circuit 12 is out, they're squawking their heads off. Take Swede and his pickup and head out. Know where it is?"

"Circuit 12? Sure!" That was between Kenmore and Lincoln, in the Lutheran Hospital district. And it ran only two short blocks from the county jail!

"Fine. Probably primary fuses, but if you need help, Lane, holler. Now get going!"

Johnny flamed with excitement as he dashed for the red-and-gold pickup and yelled at Swede to ramble. What a break! What a wonderful break!

"County jail first!" he shouted in the driver's ear. Swede merely nodded, swung around a doddering bus, and poured on the coal.

A few minutes later the truck hurtled into the alley behind the jail and screamed to a stop, Johnny leaped out, jerked a switch stick and a pair of bolt cutters from the back, and looked up the pole.

"Trouble here all right, Swede. Listen, you go on down two blocks to that junction pole and look at the section

fuses. I'll see just what I can do here."

Swede flipped the pickup into gear and shot away. Johnny hung the extra equipment on his belt the best he could, and hit the pole. His gaffs crunched into the cedar as he raced up, avoiding the heavy conduit strapped down its length. At the top, he slung his safety around the pole, snapped it into the D-ring, and leaned far back. Then he hesitated, for what he intended to do went against all the training and instinct of a public utility man.

But his resolution steeled as he thought again of Marty. And reaching up with his switch stick in the dim light, he pulled the three cutouts, one after the other. The lights of the jail blacked out.

For, tapping this circuit, the power supply of the jail ran down the pole in conduit, then underground to a large transformer bank in the basement, where it was stepped down to service voltage. In that basement vault there was also, at this moment, a temporary transformer, hooked up for a single brief and deadly use—to supply high voltage for the electric chair.

With deft twists of the switch stick, Johnny unhooked the porcelain doors of the cutouts and let them crash into shards on the concrete pavement below. Swinging around the pole, fumbling in the semi-dark, he unbolted the pothead cover with frantic turns of his wrench. With the bolt cutters, he dug into the soft, tarry compound, found the three cable connections, and cut them. Sweating with exertion, he managed to make a second cut, and threw the cable ends away. With hard blows of the cutters, he smashed the porcelain bushings, and then he slashed away the heavy copper jumpers above.

Satisfied that the damage was complete, he dropped swiftly down the pole, just as Swede drove up.

"There's two cutouts open on the junction pole," reported the grunt.

"All done here. Let's go." Johnny ordered.

At the junction pole, he re-fused the cutouts and flipped in the latches. Circuit 12 went in and held, and lights came up all over the neighborhood. From the pole, he glanced at that massive stone building two blocks away. It was still gloomily dark, and it would stay dark until the heavy gang completed a two-hour repair job. By that time it would be past midnight.

As Swede headed the pickup toward the shop, Johnny Cullane was happy. He knew he would be through with Northern Hydro when they caught up with him, but he didn't care. He slid down in the seat and lit a cigarette. As he did so, his tool belt prodded him, and he reached around and lifted out his pliers. Idly he looked at them in the dashlight.

A thought rose to the surface of his mind, and was gone. He tried to recapture it—pliers. What about pliers? Then, with a surge of excitement, he had it!

He heard again Jack Potter's voice: "You and Smoky Storrs are the only ones that use Sure-Grips."

And there was another voice, blurred with whiskey, saying: "His head all bashed in with a pair of Cranes."

Why, Marty Cullane hadn't used anything but Sure-Grips for twenty years. Yet they claimed Marty's pliers had been the killer's weapon. Who owned the Cranes? And where were Marty's Sure-Grips?

In Johnny Cullane's mind the answers dropped into place. The picture was complete. The man who used a belt so old it was a hazard, and hand tools which were a disgrace to the trade. A man so miserly he wouldn't discard a good pair of pliers even though they

could send him to the chair—Smoky Storrs!

JOHNNY let out a yell that nearly made Swede hit a sedan.

"Step on it, Swede! I got to get to the shop!"

The Swede did. At the shop, Johnny lit running. He burst into Williams' office.

"Where's Smoky Storrs?" he demanded.

"Just a minute, Lane. Circuit 12 is O. K., but Mr. Perry here, the district attorney, says the jail is out of power and he wants it back in a hurry. There must be trouble on Circuit 13."

"The D. A.? Just the man I want. Where's Smoky Storrs?"

"With the heavy gang at Third and Walnut. But—"

Williams was left gaping as Johnny grabbed the arm of the astonished official and hustled him to the pickup. Perry looked as if he thought Johnny were crazy as Johnny thrust him in, leaped into the driver's seat, and hurled the little truck down the street.

"What on earth is the idea, young man? We have an execution scheduled. It is imperative that power is restored before midnight."

"Sorry, sir. There won't be power at the jail in time for any execution tonight. But you needn't worry. I'm taking you to the real killer of Carl Hawke!"

"Cullane isn't guilty? Who—how—?"

"When we get there, you just listen. I think I can make the guy talk. You see, I know Marty Cullane can't be guilty. I'm his son, Johnny Cullane."

The D. A. was too busy hanging on to ask any more questions. Johnny missed the back of a coupe by inches, scared the wits out of a couple in a convertible, and screamed to a stop beside the big line truck as it stood with its spotlights lancing toward the dark sky.

Perry followed Johnny to the foot of the pole.

"Smoky! Smoky Storrs! Come on down!"

One of the figures outlined high in the glare of the lights detached its safety strap and clumped down the pole. As Storrs stepped to the ground, Johnny seized his arms. Storrs struggled, but Johnny's grip was steel.

"Mr. Perry, pull those pliers out of his belt. What do you see inside the handle?"

"A monogram, a large 'C' with an 'M' inside it."

"That, Mr. Perry, is the private mark of Marty Cullane. He put it on all his tools. And Marty always used Sure-Grips, never Cranes. These are Marty Cullane's pliers!"

Storrs squirmed.

"They're mine! I found them—I mean Cullane gave them to me—"

By that time the other two men were down from the pole. As Johnny held him, Storrs licked his lips nervously, and his eyes flashed like a trapped animal's as he glanced around the circle of angry men.

"Storrs," rasped Johnny harshly, "You killed Carl Hawke."

"I never done it! Cullane killed him!"

"You killed him, Storrs. Somehow you got back unseen from the Olson house. You found Hawke alone, sneaked up on him, and killed him—with your own pliers. Then you found Marty in the storeroom, drunk. You hit him on the head, pressed the bloody pliers in his hand, and took his pliers, these pliers. But you can't win, Storrs. We know now you killed Hawke. Why did you do it?"

Storrs broke. His voice rose hysterically.

"Because he was cheating me! He wouldn't give me my money. He got it from me to work this scheme, he lent it to the boys at big interest. I wanted my

cut, and he just sneered. Then I tried to get my own money back, and he sneered some more. By God, I wiped the sneer off his ugly face!"

"How did you get back from the Olson house?"

"I went back to the shop after some fuses. After—afterwards, when I got back, I found out old lady Olson didn't know I was gone. That was the time I fixed Hawke. He wasn't going to cheat me, it was my money. I worked hard for it. It didn't matter about Cullane, just a boomer that never would have any money. But my money is mine, see?"

"Why, the man's insane!" the D. A. gasped.

"How did you mark the pliers, the Cranes?" went on Johnny, remorselessly.

One of the men broke in: "There's a little electric etcher in the toolroom. Storrs must have taken his bloody pliers and stood right there and put Marty's initials on them. God, what a nerve!"

At that moment, with a burst of maniacal energy, Storrs twisted catlike from Johnny's grasp. Before anyone could move, he took two quick steps and hit the pole. Men reached for him, but he jammed his spurs into the wood and raced upward. At the bottom crossarm he stopped and glared down into the blazing spotlights.

"You won't get me!" he screeched. "Carl Hawke was stealing my money. I had a right to kill him!"

As he spoke, he took two more upward steps.

"Storrs! That primary's hot!"

But it was too late. The killer took one more step, and at the pole top a blinding, blue-green glare blossomed. The thuttering snarl of the power arc roared viciously through the night, and Storrs' body stiffened, bent backward, and toppled crazily from the pole. It hit the secondary wires, spun, then dropped limply, to strike within the scattered circle of men with a sickening, sodden crunch. A few wisps of smoke rose from its smoldering clothes—and that was all.

A few minutes later, Johnny Cullane and Charles Perry stood talking quietly as a police ambulance prepared to remove the scorched bundle of rags that had been Smoky Storrs. Johnny had told his story briefly, and the D. A. had thanked him for his help in preventing a ghastly mistake. As they got into the pickup, the D. A. said: "Let's go to the jail first, Cullane. I'm going to let you break the good news."

Johnny Cullane grinned happily at the thought. Then he sobered as he watched the doors of the police ambulance close. Grimly, he spoke: "Mr. Perry, there was an execution tonight. But it wasn't on Circuit 13!"

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**Fells was only a third-rate booking agent, but still he had the angle to make good a forgery, disentangle a bigamist — and awaken two corpses.**

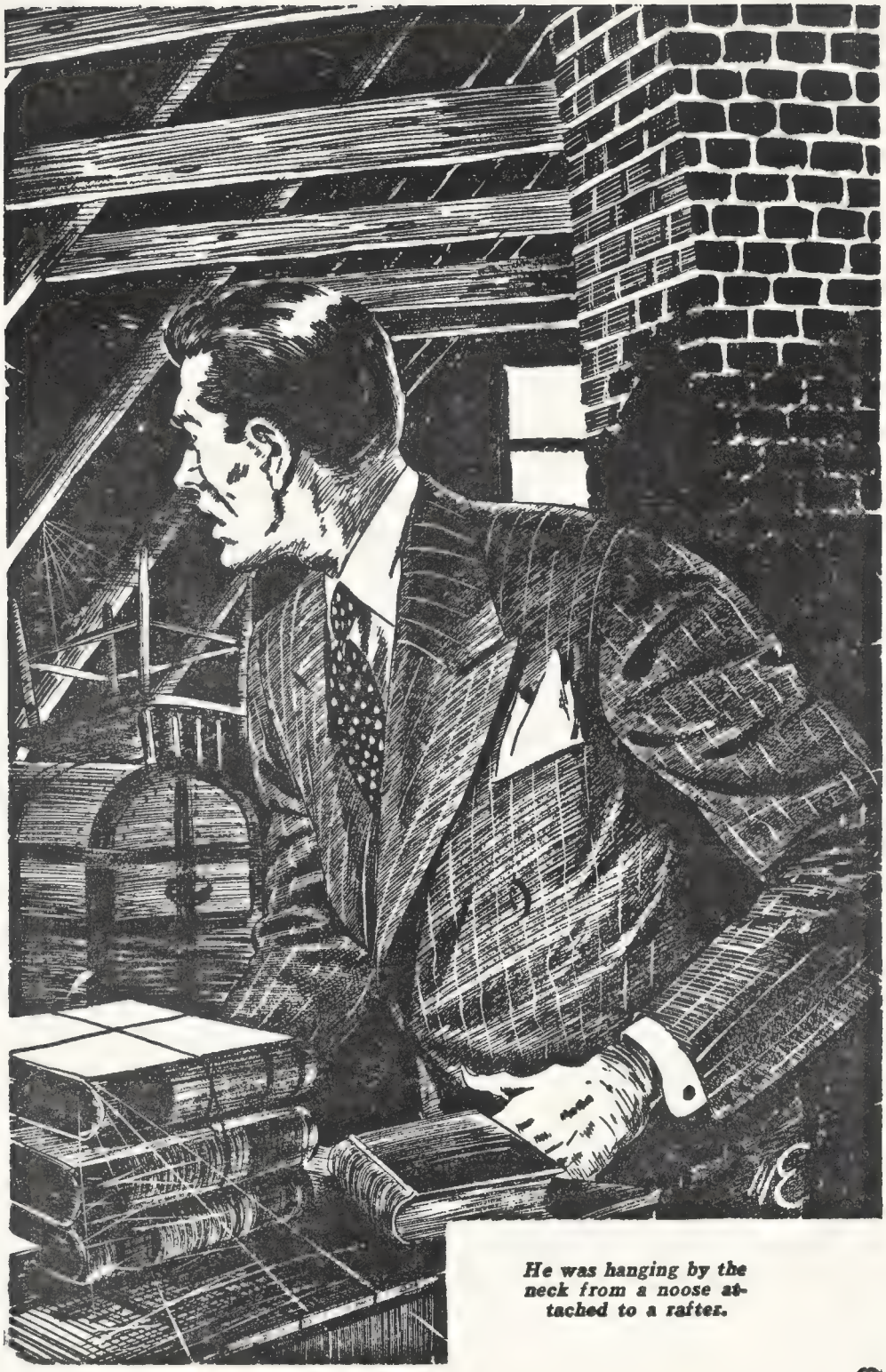
# LEGITIMATELY DEAD

**By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**

FELLS hoped the somebody in the hall would get tired and go away. When the knocking at the door grew louder and more persistent, he sighed, sat up in bed, and turned on the lamp. His alarm clock said 3:20 A. M. And Fells said, "For cripesake," or something like that.

"It's me, Mr. Fells—Mrs. Sandorf," his landlady called from the hall, loud enough so that her other roomers wouldn't get the idea there was anything clandestine going on between herself and Mr. Fells.

Fells kicked off the sheet. He said, "Just a minute, darling," also loud; his fellow tenants could think any damned



*He was hanging by the neck from a noose attached to a rafter.*

thing that amused them. When you've spent the earliest months of your life in the top of a vaudeville trouper's trunk, you like people to be amused.

Fells toed small feet into slippers, stumbled to the closet for a dressing gown of maroon rayon satin which he put on. Habitually careful of his appearance, he made sure that the collar was smoothly turned and the sash tied a little to the right of center before he went to the door.

Mrs. Sandorf, her gray hair in short stiff pigtails, clutched the front of an Indian blanket robe that no self-respecting Navajo would have been caught dead in.

"One of your *artists*," she said, her irony no doubt inspired by the legend "Artists Management" on Fells' business card. "Down in my parlor. That old mesmerizing man, what's he call himself—Sir Cedric, ain't it? I seen him yesterday in the window of that furniture store on College Avenue." Mrs. Sandorf jeopardized her modesty to make passes in front of Fells' small face in imitation of Sir Cedric Jones, billed as the Master Hypnotist. "Sleep, sleep, sleep!"

"I'd like to," Fells said.

"Well, doesn't he ever?" Mrs. Sandorf rattled on, her jowls trembling with indignation. "Doesn't he know it's after three in the morn—he probably doesn't. If he had a watch, it would be in hock. Him poundin' on the door like to wake the dead!"

Fells pointed to the closet where he and Mrs. Sandorf—certainly Mrs. Sandorf—knew there was a bottle of rye whiskey. "Have yourself a snifter for your trouble," he suggested as he stepped into the hall. "But don't bother to fill the bottle with water this time. That stuff is getting pretty weak."

When Fells appeared between the sliding doors of Mrs. Sandorf's parlor, the thin old man with the black dyed hair and sunken eyes to match stood up and put his hat on as though right now they were going somewhere. Whatever it was he started to say had to give way to the priority of his dry, racking cough. He went for his handkerchief.

"Take it easy, Jonesy," Fells said.

Faint spots of color appeared beneath Sir Cedric's high cheek bones. Fells thought there were probably spots of color, not so faint, on the handkerchief which the old man quickly pocketed, out of sight, out of mind. His eyes, bloodshot and feverish, turned to Fells.

"I can't wake Lazarus, Fells." Sir Cedric raised his hands a little way, his crippled finger stiff—a helpless little gesture that fell apart before it was wholly drawn. He shook his head. "I—I can't, that's all. I can't wake him."

Lazarus—that could hardly have been his real name—was Jonesy's hypnotic subject, an alcoholic, a complete stinker in Fells' opinion, who possessed the unique ability of remaining in one posion for hours and hours when properly liquored up. Right now, Lazarus was in bed on a Rest-Mor mattress in the window of Cassway's New and Used Furniture Mart on College Avenue. He had been there since four o'clock of the previous afternoon.

"What do you want to wake him up for? He's scheduled to hold the trance for twenty-four hours." Fells spoke quietly, a mannerism sometimes mistaken for disinterest.

Sir Cedric shook his head vigorously. "Young fool, you!" he almost sobbed. "You—you didn't think it was the real thing, did you?"

"No."

"He—he's simply in a drunken stupor. I don't know anything about hypnotism. I—I'm a magician. I—" The old man paused, glancing down at his crippled hands.

"You were," Fells reminded him, adding: "You were the best damned magician I ever saw."

"Thank you, Fells." The faint reminiscent smile faded from Sir Cedric's withered lips. "Lazarus is never, *never* out longer than twelve hours at a time."

Fells pulled thoughtfully at his nose. It was a small nose, too small, and he was always pulling it. "Maybe he's trying to break his record. Even if he could get thirteen hours to the gallon, that'd help, the asking price of rotgut nowdays. Anyway, why come to me? I told you not to go through with the act. We could have broken the contract with Cassway, because I'd pretty well convinced him yesterday morning that it wouldn't sell furniture for him. It wouldn't have cost you a cent, because I guaranteed you the price of the act, remember?

"Lazarus"—a shiver rippled across the old man's thin shoulders, "he insisted on going through with it."

IT WAS an admission of something that Fells already knew, though perhaps Sir Cedric hadn't permitted himself to suspect it until recently: Lazarus was the act—not Cedric Jones. Without Lazarus, Jones was just another old man with a scrapbook full of yellowed publicity notices. Jonesy, Fells thought, pretty well personified the heartbreak of show business. You climbed from bally platform to vaudeville. You sunk everything you could save and borrow into your own show and took it to Europe and South America. Maybe you pulled yourself out of the red and were ready to step into the lucrative spots in New York and Hollywood when something happened. Like a prop trunk falling on your fingers, crushing them, destroying the leaders. Forty years of slavery to your act shot to hell in a matter of seconds. You crawled back into the hinterland, you and your scrapbook, reduced to a phony hypnotic act. You begged third-rate agents—Fells had no delusions about his own stature in the entertainment world—to book you into a one-night stand somewhere, or a store window pitch. And you'd better like peanuts . . .

Fells' blue, dollar-hard eyes softened a little as he turned toward the stair. "Siddown Jonesy, while I get into my rags," he said.

Mrs. Sandorf was lingering just outside the door of Fells' room when he got there. Her breath reeked of whiskey. "Well, what's he want?" she demanded.

Fells leered at her and started to untie the sash of his robe. He said: "Did I ever show you the kootch dancer I got tattooed on me?" This got rid of Mrs. Sandorf, and Fells made a mental note to try the same gag sometime when she came around for the rent. He dressed without any apparent hurry—a navy blue suit with chalk stripes, white shirt, blue-and-white polka dot tie, black elevator oxfords, even to a gay bit of silk handkerchief lolling out of his breast pocket. He got his new light gray hat out of the tissue packing in its box, creased it to his satisfaction, put in on at a jaunty angle. If he could have got by with it, he'd have carried a cane.

He went downstairs, had to wait until Cedric Jones lived through another paroxysm of coughing, and then led the way out the door of the lodging house to where Fells' car was parked at the curb. It was an impressively long sedan, black and shiny with chrome. It had gone over two hundred thousand miles mostly within the boundaries of Indiana. It was a pile of junk. The night was warm and the engine turned over after the sixth try. Fells turned out into the deserted street and headed across town. When the valves had quieted down enough to make conversation possible,

he told the old man beside him to spill it.

There wasn't a whole lot to spill. Presumably Sir Cedric was at liberty to go to his hotel room after the store closed at nine P. M., but the old man hadn't done that. He never did, he said. He never left the drunken Lazarus alone in a window for any great length of time.

About two-thirty, Sir Cedric said, he'd gone down to the all-night lunchroom on the corner for a roll and a cup of coffee. He'd got back before three, when Lazarus ought to have begun to show some signs of life, but Lazarus hadn't stirred.

"I began to get worried," Sir Cedric confessed. "It always worries me, a chronic drunk like that. You know how he is, Fells—always at least half-stewed. It's slow poison to him."

Fells nodded. Lazarus' flesh was yellowish and damp. It hung loosely on his big, raw-boned frame. He said: "And you couldn't wake him."

"I couldn't."

"I'll try," Fells said. He turned the big heap into College Avenue. "What about the third member of your team? The shill you had planted in the crowd to come up and testify that Lazarus was apparently dead?"

The old man shook his head. "No shill. No, Fells."

"Sure. I was there yesterday afternoon, didn't you notice? A guy came into the window after you'd put Lazarus under. A guy with black hair growing half way down his forehead. Wore a tweed suit—"

"He wasn't a shill, I tell you," Sir Cedric insisted. "I always asked if somebody'll come up, but I don't urge it. The act is too crude for close inspection. But this time, as soon as I mentioned it, this guy you mentioned wanted to come into the window. When the clems set up a howl to let him in, what could I do? He gave Lazarus the once over, and you heard what he said into the mike."

" 'This man is as good as dead,' with a distinct San Quentin accent," Fells recalled. "Kind of a threat, maybe?"

"Not necessarily. No. He couldn't have seen Lazarus breathing because of the buckram shell inside Lazarus' coat."

"But maybe a kind of threat," Fells persisted. "Ever see the guy before today?"

"No. Never."

"You don't know Lazarus very well, do you, Jonesy? You'd never met him before you and he hooked up about a year ago?

"No. I don't even know his real name."

Fells knew, but he didn't say anything. Lazarus wasn't show people. Lazarus was something that had crawled out of the slime, but not very far. Something that needed stepping on.

Jonesy was coughing again. When he had wiped his mouth and hidden his stained handkerchief, he asked Fells: "How come you wanted to pull out the act after we'd all signed? A funny attitude for an agent to take."

"Damned funny," Fells admitted. "I slay me sometimes."

"It would have cost you a nice piece of change—if you meant what you said about guaranteeing the net."

"It wouldn't have cost me a cent," Fells said truthfully. "I had another pitch for you. A tavern in Fort Wayne." Anything to get Lazarus out of town. An hour before the act had opened in Cassway's window, Fells had been in the men's room at the rear of the furniture store, trying to convince Lazarus that what he was going to do wouldn't do anybody any good. And Lazarus had laughed horribly, his eyes already glazed with drink. He'd pitched an empty whiskey bottle at Fells, had told Fells to go to hell. To Lazarus, this particular appearance had been a labor of love. Or call it a labor of hate. There was no

stopping him by any conceivable means —short of murder.

THEY had come now into a third-rate shopping district in a down-at-the-heels neighborhood. The all-night lunchroom on the corner was lighted as was the show window of Cassway's New and Used Furniture Mart half way down the block. Fells parked across from Cassway's and in front of a tall, gray frame residence. As he got out of the car, he thought he saw a flicker of light behind one of the windows.

Cedric Jones came reluctantly around the car to join Fells and they crossed the deserted street to the garish window of the furniture store where a bedroom suite in flame-swirled walnut veneers was displayed. The bed was the central attraction. Lazarus lay on a Rest-Mor mattress, fully dressed and flat on his back. he looked dead.

Cassway's entry formed a cove around the show window on three sides. They went around to the back where one of the large glass panels could be slid back. For this publicity stunt a steel hasp had been attached and secured with a large brass padlock, its keyhole sealed with a blob of red wax impressed with a signet that had been supplied by some volunteer from the crowd on the previous afternoon.

Fells pointed to the seal on the lock. "You've got a way around that, I suppose."

Sir Cedric nodded. "My own invention. A secret I've never released." This with a quavering note of pride. He cupped his crippled hands around the lock, turned his back to Fells for an instant, and then the lock was open, its wax seal intact. The old man looked at Fells and smiled slightly.

A wave of pity for the old trouper passed disturbingly over Fells. He said harshly: "All right. Now that I've applauded like hell, let's get in there." He threw his hundred and sixteen pounds against the edge of the panel, shoved it along its tracks, and climbed up into the window. Sir Cedric followed.

Fells stared down at the face on the pillow. Not a pretty face, yellowish, coarse-featured, topped off with blond, crew-cut hair.

Then Fells stooped over and tried to find the pressure spot at Lazarus' throat. The flesh was warm, but if there was any pulse Fells couldn't find it. With his fingers trembling slightly, he unbuttoned Lazarus' coat. Buckram crackled. He pushed back the stiffened flap, exposing the shirt front. On Lazarus' chest, directly over the shirt pocket, was what appeared to be a small round ash tray of cast metal, innocuous enough until Fells noticed the peened end of a piece of steel that entered the metal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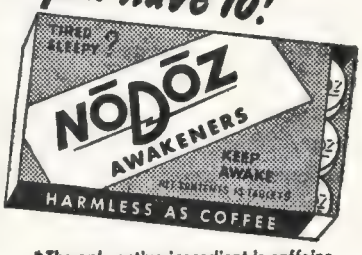


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dish. He realized that he was looking at the wrong end of a bill spike. The right end—wrong from Lazarus' viewpoint, if he'd had one—was somewhere in Lazarus' heart. There was no visible blood.

"So you couldn't raise Lazarus, huh, Jonesy?" Fells said softly without turning around. "Just who the hell do you think you are, anyway?"

"Dead?" the old man whispered.

"Uh-huh. From murder, looks like." Fells twisted around. Sir Cedric had backed as far as the glass would let him. His mouth was open, his sunken eyes fixed on the bed. Fells said: "You'd better call the cops. Try that lunchroom on the corner. And—wait a second," as Cedric edged toward the opening in the show window. "Don't forget to come back."

Fells watched the old man climb out of the window and stumble off into the shadows. Then Fells turned back to the corpse on the bed, reached into Lazarus' inner coat pocket, took out a wallet. The identification form within gave Lazarus' name as Richard Wartz, which was no news to Fells but which might have made interesting reading to a lot of people. Bold lettering requested that in case of accident one Albert Wartz, brother, should be notified.

It was no coincidence that Albert Wartz's address was that of the tall, gray frame house directly across the street from Cassway's.

Fells took the identification card out of its compartment. He wiped the wallet carefully with his handkerchief before he put it back where he'd found it, wondering in a remote, almost disinterested manner if he wasn't shielding a murderer. Richard "Lazarus" Wartz had contrived circumstances under which even a square-shooting joe like City Councilman Al Wartz might have been provoked to kill.

The scheme, Fells thought, was as transparent as it was nasty. For politically sound reasons, Al Wartz had never mentioned that he had a brother. Those persons who had known the Wartz boys during childhood were generally under the impression that Richard was dead. Well, he was now, but you couldn't very well die in a show window without attracting a good deal of attention. You couldn't even go into a state of "suspended animation" in a show window without exciting some newspaper interest. The whole thing had been designed by Richard Wartz as a means of mentally tormenting his brother. Al had been aware of the whole proceedings, had been forced to watch the build-up from the old family home across the street. Al had known that sooner or later his blacksheep brother would get a press interview. Lazarus would reveal his real name and his relationship to the city councilman who fully expected to snag the nomination for mayor in the May primaries. A long lost brother story couldn't end right there. Where had Richard Wartz been all these years? Well, some of the time he had been the unwilling guest of a couple of state institutions out west by reason of crimes ranging from armed robbery to manslaughter. Married? Not now, but he had been for a while—a very short while—to a kid named Roberta who thought she could sing. She'd had stars in her eyes and no brains in her head, and he'd met her in a night club down on the Ohio River. . . . Say, that's not the same Roberta that City Councilman Wartz is married to now, is it?

That's the way it would run, Fells thought. Or would have, if Lazarus had gone on living. Lazarus' motive? Not blackmail. Al Wartz, through Fells, had tried to buy off Lazarus, but Lazarus wouldn't be bought. Hate, maybe—an envious hate for all the decent things that Al Wartz represented. Jealousy,

maybe, because of Roberta. Fells didn't know, and he didn't think that it mattered. Al Wartz was Fells' friend, and he didn't have many; he kept the ones that he had.

Fells crossed to the opening in the window, sprang lightly down to the entryway floor, went out onto the sidewalk. He looked up and down the deserted street, then crossed, climbed onto the veranda of the dark old house opposite Cassway's. He put his thumb on the bellpush and left it there until it became apparent that he wasn't going to get an answer. For a moment, he considered dropping the identification card through the mailslot, but in the end he came back to the curb, lighted a cigarette, and touched the flame to the corner of the card. He watched it burn to black ash.

It couldn't block the road back which the police would follow until they established Lazarus' identity. It could only serve to establish a detour. To gain time.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Ladies Welcome

"WELL, well, if it isn't little Fells, all dolled up to look like a million bucks."

Fells' hand was engulfed by that of Homicide's Lieutenant Saul Vesper who had, as he put it, set up shop in the office of Cassway's Furniture Mart. His present familiarity sprang from several previous occasions when Vesper, as committee chairman for the Police Benefit Party, had bought entertainment from Fells.

Fells, who chose friends with the same care that he exercised in selecting his neckties, scarcely returned Saul Vesper's smile as he sat down in the chair at the side of the desk. Not that he had anything against the lieutenant. It was simply that he viewed proffered camaraderie from a police official with a lot of suspicion.

"Know any reason why we shouldn't hold that old duffer who just went out of here on a murder charge?" Vesper, of course, referred to Cedric Jones.

"No," Fells said. "Except that he probably didn't do it."

The gray eyes were immediately less frendly. "What makes you say that?"

Fells shrugged. "No motive. The only thing Jonesy knows is magic, and those crippled hands of his put an end to that a long time ago. His current act is entirely dependent upon his having a good professional hypnotic subject. He wouldn't destroy his only means of earning a living."

Fells glanced uneasily toward the police stenographer scribbling shorthand in the corner. His eyes went back to Vesper in time to catch a quick, shrewd smile.

"Thanks, Fells. That gives us a motive."

"How come?"

Vesper lighted a cigarette. After he'd inhaled a couple of drags, he said: "Here's an old showman who used to get top billing and who finds that his stooge has stolen the show. Professional jealousy. It's figured in killings before."

Fells sneered openly. "Now you're cashing in on your wide experience as twice head of the entertainment committee for the Police Benefit Party! Listen, Lieutenant, the clems didn't know that Lazarus was the whole show. The applause went to Sir Cedric."

"I'm talking about *his* viewpoint—Sir Cedric's. It's not where the applause went, it's where it belonged. The old duck knew where it belonged. Lazarus was the act. He had Sir Cedric under his thumb. The old man admitted as much."

If Saul Vesper expected further argu-

ment, he was disappointed. After a moment of silence, he asked: "Any reason to suspect that anyone besides Cedric Jones could open that gimmick padlock without breaking the wax seal?"

"No."

Vesper spread his hands contentedly on the desk top. "Then that's all there is. Open and shut. The old gent insists he's never given the secret of that lock to anyone. It's a matter of pride with him, proving, I think, some mental aberration."

"That's a hell of a big word," Fells said dryly. "What you mean is that honesty is the worst policy."

Color deepened in Saul Vesper's long face. "I wouldn't say that."

"I know you wouldn't. But you've got to admit that if Sir Cedric had told you that he'd shared the secret of the lock with ten other people, you'd automatically have ten other suspects, any one of which might have killed Lazarus. Ever try to prove you don't know something?"

Vesper didn't answer and Fells stood up, adjusting the brim of his soft gray hat. He said, "You must be in a hell of a hurry for breakfast, Lieutenant," and would have gone to the door except that Vesper stayed him with a gesture involving only one finger.

"Just one more question, if you don't mind. Why did you try to get Lazarus and the old man to renege after signing that contract with Cassway to put on this show in the window?"

Fells had expected something like that. He said: "I didn't think it would sell any beds for Cassway, and I don't like kickbacks. Doesn't the whole idea suggest that you've got to be put into a trance to sleep on a Rest-Mor mattress?"

Vesper smiled thinly. "Why did you sell Cassway the show in the first place?"

"I didn't. Cassway was already sold. Jones and Lazarus simply wanted my representation on the final dicker. That's not unusual. A lot of roving talent nail their spots before they move into a town but hire a local agent to handle the business and push publicity. It pays."

Vesper thought that over a moment, tapping cigarette ash into a bowl on Mr. Cassway's desk. "You've known Sir Cedric and Lazarus a long time?"

"Cedric—yes." Fells was squirming, and he hated squirmers. He added; "Lazarus wasn't show people."

"And you don't know who Lazarus actually was?"

"No," Fells lied and watched Vesper's face for any indication that it hadn't gone over. There was none. Fells said hurriedly; "Why don't you go after the guy who got into Cassway's window right after Lazarus went into his so-called trance? Some bird who came in from the crowd at Jonesy's not too cordial invitation to see just how far under Lazarus was. He looked like tough stuff to me—black hair growing down low on his forehead, a scar on his chin that he didn't get shaving, a San Quentin accent. He said into the mike that Lazarus was as good as dead. That could have been a threat."

"Could be," Saul Vesper admitted. "Thanks for the tip, Fells. You can go, but don't leave town until this is all washed up."

Fells nodded brusquely, turned, stalked out of the office on highly polished elevator shoes. Mr. Cassway, the graying proprietor, was waiting outside in a hideous blue mohair upholstered chair. He looked up with unhappy eyes, and Fells' small face crinkled into a smile.

"Too bad the Rest-Mor people don't make caskets, isn't it, Mr. Cassway?" he said and then went out the front door into the new morning.

Fells crossed the street to his shiny heap and got in. He pulled on the nar-

row gold chain that crossed his vest, took out a nickel-plated watch which he never consulted except in solitude. Five after five. He'd be able to catch a couple of hours sleep before going downtown to his office.

He'd driven about six blocks when he realized he'd acquired a tail. A black Dodge. Fast or slow, the Dodge was always there, about half a block behind. When Fells pulled to the curb in front of the rooming house, the Dodge parked about five doors to the south. The driver didn't get out when Fells did but slumped down behind the wheel and unfurled a newspaper. A cop, Fells decided. Maybe Saul Vesper had changed his mind about the killing being all cut and dried.

FELLS entered the front hall of the lodging house, moved on tiptoe to the closet under the stair where the phone was located. He dialed Al Wartz's number but gave that up after a dozen rings. He picked up the directory, thumbed into the G's to find *Groover, Maurice E.*, Al Wartz's nephew and junior partner in the Wartz Tea and Spice Company. If Al and Roberta Wartz had left town suddenly, Maurice Groover ought to know about it.

Groover's tenor voice answered almost at once, and Fells said: "I've been trying the Al Wartz number, Maurice . . . Yeah, this is Fells. Do you happen to know where they are?"

"No-o," Groover replied slowly. "That is—well, Uncle Al ought to be at home. Roberta moved into the St. Charles, or did you know that?"

"The hell," Fells said disgustedly. "What's wrong with her now? Show fever again?"

"Well—" Groover hesitated then laughed uneasily. "It's none of my business. You'll have to ask Roberta."

"Thanks, I will." And Fells hung up. He had a notion he'd hung up in Maurice E. Groover's ear. He consulted the directory again, got the number of the St. Charles Apartment Hotel, dialed and asked the switchboard to connect him with Robert Wartz. He had a long wait before Roberta's husky, provocative voice came out of the receiver.

"Do you still wake up singing?" Fells asked.

That took a little time to soak in. When it did, Roberta said, "Oh, it's Fellsy!" as though this were a game and she'd won.

"Do you know where Al is?"

"Al?"

"Come on, come on," Fells said testily. "The one you're married to now, I think."

"If you mean the Honorable Albert Wartz," she said, "I have no longer the slightest interest in him nor his where-

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abouts. And furthermore—" Roberta stopped being lofty as she apparently noticed the clock. "Say, do you know what time it is? You've got a nerve, you have!"

"Hey, wait—" Fells tried to forestall a quick hang up. "I've got news for you."

"What?" It sounded pouty.

"Your ex has been X-ed out."

From the other end of the line came a little gasp and then silence. Fells said hello without getting any response. Roberta Wartz had hung up.

Two and a half hours later, the black Dodge followed Fells downtown. After he'd left his car at a parking lot, the Dodge was replaced by an unobtrusive gray raincoat, but that was essentially the same—all cop and close to a yard wide.

It then stalled at the cigar counter when Fells entered the Curtis Building where he had his office. Fells went on back to the little group of slaves who were waiting in front of the elevators, and there spotted a plump, dimpled young man wearing a nice swatch of tan gabardine. That was one thing about Maurice E. Groover—he knew good clothes.

"Looking for me?" Fells touched the plump young man's arm.

Round, perpetually startled blue eyes looked down at Fells. "Yes, I'm looking for you," Groover said coolly.

"All right." Fells cupped Groover's elbow and steered him around and toward the lobby entrance. At the cigar stand, the cop was taking a free look at the morning headlines.

"What's wrong with your office?" Groover wanted to know when they had reached the sidewalk.

"Nothing, except that it hasn't a back door. Notice the guy in the gray raincoat back there?"

"What about him?"

"Cop," Fells said. "Let's jaywalk. That tavern over there. A lady friend of mine owns the joint."

Maurice E. Groover glanced back over a big shoulder when they were half way across the street. "I don't see your friend."

"You will." Fells hurried the plump young man up onto the opposite curb and through the door of Mabel Hauser's Alibi Tavern. The place looked like any other taproom at nine in the morning—one man behind the bar, two old sots in front, and all of the tables had chairs on them. Fells removed chairs from the table nearest the window and sat down with his back toward the street. Maurice E. Groover hesitated.

"Your friend is on his way over."

"Sit down," Fells ordered coldly. "And don't keep calling him my friend."

The plump young man sat down as though he had eggs in his hip pockets. He proffered cigarettes from a silver case, then struck and held a lighter. The flame was shaky.

"Man, is Uncle Al ever burned up."

"You've seen him this morning?"

"No. Not since yesterday evening—" Groover broke off as the fat barkeep waddled toward the table.

Fells said: "We don't want anything, Heine. Is Mabel in her office?"

The barkeep stopped, drying his hands on his apron. "Want I should call her, Mr. Fells?"

"No, thanks. We'll go on in after a bit." Fells turned cool blue eyes on Groover. "Get it off your chest. What's Al burned up about?"

"Why, you told him you'd prevent Uncle Dick from pulling that fool hypnotic act in Cassway's window. You said you'd get Uncle Dick out of town and keep him there. You said—"

"Well?" Fells broke in harshly. "Uncle Dick isn't in Cassway's window. Where's the gripe?"

The round blue eyes blinked a couple

of times. "You mean you got him out?"

"In a way, yes. I told the guy who called the guy who phoned the hospital which sent the interns who took Lazarus out of the window and put him in the morgue."

"My God!" Maurice Groover breathed. "You mean—say, you didn't—"

Fells shook his head. "Did you?"

"You mean . . . Murder?"

"I don't know that I do. There was a bill spike sticking in your Uncle Dick's chest. I didn't see any blood, but that doesn't mean anything. The cops are acting like it was murder."

MAURICE E. GROOVER moistened pale lips with his tongue. Ash trembled off his cigarette. "That's just as bad, politically, for Uncle Al as if Uncle Dick went through with the original scheme."

Fells said: "I don't think so. Something happened to Lazarus' identification card. Of course, the cops will get the truth eventually, but by that time things will have simmered down a little." He glanced over his shoulder, saw the broad rear of the gray raincoat on the other side of the glass. Fells' hand darted over the top of the green velvet half-curtain and took an eight-by-eleven inch pasteboard sign out of the window. The sign read, "Ladies Welcome," and he placed it on the table directly in front of him.

"Well, have they—" Groover stared at the sign, frowning, "are they suspicious of anybody?"

Fells smiled slightly. He reached into his pocket and brought out a penknife. "Right now, Saul Vesper is concentrating on Sir Cedric Jones, because he thinks Jonesy is the only one who could have opened that trick padlock on Cassway's window. But he'll get over it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the lock has a wax seal over the keyhole, but Jonesy can open it without breaking the seal by means of a secret gimmick. While the gimmick may be clever as hell, the padlock itself wouldn't stop the average housewife with a hairpin."

"But the seal—if it wasn't broken, how could it be done?"

Fells had gone to work on the "Ladies Welcome" sign with his knife. "Make a duplicate seal," he said. "All you've got to do is to take an impression of the original before you break it, then cast a duplicate in wax which you stick into place with household cement. Anybody can do it with a little know-how."

Maurice E. Groover squirmed on his chair. "May I ask what the hell you're doing?"

Fells had cut the word "Welcome" off the bottom of the sign, and now he was neatly trimming the "Ladies". He didn't answer.

"You've no idea where your Uncle Al is?"

"No. He ought to be at home. Have you tried since you talked to me on the phone?"

"No." Fells put his hand under the table and fingered around until he located a wad of old chewing gum. He dug his knife into it. "I couldn't get anything out of Roberta either. What's between those two anyway—what besides the fact that Al is ten years older than she and likes to live in an old house and be a friend of the pee-pul?"

Groover shook his head. "You'll have to ask Roberta." He watched Fells' fingers kneeding the second-hand gum. "That's pretty damned revolting, if you ask me."

Fells thought so too, but when you did dirty work you expected to get your fingers dirty. He stuck the wad of gum onto the back of the cardboard sign which he'd reduced to the single word,

"Ladies." He said: "We'd better try to locate Al."

Groover's eyes sent worriedly to the back of the gray raincoat which blotted out a considerable portion of the window. "What about that detective?"

"We'll shake him." Fells stood up. "Stick close to me." He started toward the rear of the tavern with the fat boy breathing down the back of his neck. There was a narrow hall opening next to the juke box. They entered, passed a flight of stairs that led up to Mabel Hauser's apartment on the second floor, and came to a solid wood door at the end. Fells put the "Ladies" sign in the center of the panel where the wad of gum held it after some slight pressure. He knocked. Mabel Hauser said: "Come in."

Fells opened the door, led Maurice Groover into Mabel's office, closed the door. He didn't immediately turn around, and Mabel Hauser asked what the hell he was doing.

Groover—he must have been facing Mabel and slightly embarrassed about the whole thing—said uneasily: "How do you do, ah—uhm."

"Shut up," Fells whispered. He'd heard the front door of the taproom open and close, and now the plodding footsteps of Saul Vesper's man entered the mouth of the narrow hall and paused uncertainly. When the footsteps started up the stairway that led to Mabel's flat, Fells wheeled and took three quick steps that brought him to the desk where the big, pillowy woman in black was seated. He had his finger on his lips, and his eyes were wary.

Mabel stuck a pencil into her steel wool hair and scratchd with it. "What the hell are you doing, Fells? Who's that fat boy gaping at me?"

Fells said: "A cop just went up into your flat. He's looking for me."

Mabel grunted and heaved out of her chair. Her wrinkled face was grim. "Why would he look up there, for cripesakes?"

"I don't know, unless he's got a nasty mind. Think you can show him through your flat and prove to him I'm not there?"

"It'll be a pleasure." Mabel went out the office door and slammed it.

Fells winked at Maurice Groover who was nervously snicking a thumbnail on his front teeth. They could hear Mabel's heavy tread on the stair, her growl of protest. Then the door of the flat opened and two pairs of feet pounded along the floor above. Fells crooked a finger at Groover, quietly opened the office door, and stepped out into the narrow hall. Groover was right behind him all the way to the street.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Rope's End

MAURICE GROOVER'S car was parked handily in the next block, and Fells thought they ought to use it rather than go to the lot for his own heap. Groover still insisted that his Uncle Al ought to be at home. He drove out to the old Wartz house across from the new and used furniture mart. Cassway's window was stripped of everything, but its very nakedness held a morbid fascination and the sidewalk was thronged with people who had come to view the spot marked X. The absence of blood must have been a disappointment.

Groover parked on the west side of the street, and as he and Fells approached the councilman's house, the former pointed to a canary yellow roadster that stood at the curb with engine heat shimmering up from the long hood.

"Roberta's," he said.

They went up onto the veranda, and Groover rang the bell. The door was immediately opened by Roberta herself

wearing a fawn-colored three piece new-look suit that would have made a fashionable frump out of a lot of women but didn't seem to hurt Roberta Wartz in the least. Fells had often thought that Roberta would be a riot in a gunny sack, the way she was stacked. She was taller than Fells by about four inches. Her hair was ash blond. She had clear fair skin and a small straight nose. The stars in her eyes were standard equipment; Fells noticed them now, but they seemed less bright, or it was a different kind of brightness. Fear?

She said: "Cuh—come in." She didn't stand aside, but let go of the knob and backed away stiffly as though Fells and Groover were tourists from a leper colony.

Maurice Groover didn't seem to notice anything wrong. He took off his hat, stepped over the sill and asked: "Where's—" That was all. Somebody to the left kicked the door shut behind Fells. A short, male somebody whose broad shoulders were putting a lot of strain on the sleazy fabric of a cheap, gray tweed suit. A somebody with a jagged scar across a wide chin. A somebody whose gray felt hat didn't conceal black hair that grew into a widow's peak between chocolate-brown eyes. A somebody with a gun.

"Get 'em up." The San Quentin accent which Fells had last heard around four o'clock on the previous afternoon coming from the PA loudspeakers in Cassway's entry. Then, no less threatening than now, it had said of Richard "Lazarus" Wartz: "This man is as good as dead."

Fells put up his hands. His eyes shifted from the menacing snout of a .38 Colt's to a Victorian loveseat where lay Roberta Wartz's purse, lining turned inside out and contents scattered over the upholstery—lipstick, vanity, cigarettes, hanky, matches, but nothing that resembled money.

"Turn around," Tweed-suit ordered. "Both of youse."

They turned around. Fells caught a glimpse of Maurice E. Groover's face, the color of wax, the shivering consistency of jelly. Tweed-suit stuck a hand into the fat boy's left trouser pocket and turned it inside out. Something shiny, possibly a cigarette lighter, hit the floor. Tweed-suit started for another pocket, and then Maurice Groover did something that only a jackass would have done. He kicked backwards at Tweed-suit and, from the sound of things, he must have connected with a vulnerable spot. Fells hadn't supposed there was anything that could be described as a hoarse yelp up until now. Groover spun on his left foot, wild-eyed, mouth contorted, and kicked again, this time connecting with Tweed-suit's right wrist.

Twed-suit didn't have a gun anymore. It was a miracle, of course, but the gun was down there on the Turkey red carpet along with a lot of feet. Fells dove for it, got it along with a kick in the side that rolled him into the legs of a table. When he got onto his hands and knees, the fat boy and Tweed-suit were slugging it out like a couple of love-sick swains fighting over the same girl. Which reminded Fells of Roberta. He glanced quickly about the room. No Roberta. Her purse was still on the loveseat, but Fells didn't think she'd return for it. He stood up and danced out of the way of one of Groover's wild haymakers.

"Box him, Groover! Keep up the right and feed him the left. Go on, punch him."

Maurice Groover was out-classed. He had a cut under one eye and his nose was bloody.

"Maybe you'd better kick him again," Fells coached. "You did all right with your feet."

Tweed-suit popped one to Maurice

Groover's chin, and the fat boy stumbled backwards, hit the floor with his backside, leaned up against the loveseat, and went to sleep. Fells, the gun in his hand, counted: ". . . Seven . . . Eight . . .Nine . . . Ten. The win—nah and new champeen . . ." Twed-suit swung around, winded, his fists cocked. Fells said: "How'd you like a lead medal pinned inside somewhere?"

The big fists dropped. Chocolatey-brown eyes rolled upward. "Mister, we can make a deal. You gotta lemme outa here."

"I do?" Fells' eyes widened.

"I didun do it, on the level. He musta croaked hisself."

"You think so? Where?

"Inna attic."

Fells said: "Turn around." Tweed-suit ran his tongue out across his lower lip. It was bleeding a little where one of the fat boy's wild ones had connected. Fells stepped in close, rammed the gun into the other's middle. "You think I'm kidding?" Tweed-suit turned around, and Fells immediately clipped him behind the right ear with the muzzle of the automatic. The man collapsed in Fells' arms, and Fells lowered him to the floor.

Fells went to the front window and looked out into the street. Roberta's yellow convertible had disappeared. He returned to the unconscious Maurice Groover, got down on one knee, stuck a hand into Groover's right trouser pocket, and turned it inside out. Some soiled gray, crumbly stuff scattered out onto the carpet. Fells picked up a piece and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. Bread crumbs, he decided.

He went through the rest of Groover's pockets without finding anything of value except fourteen dollars and eighty-six cents in change and currency. Fells stood up. He glanced at Tweed-suit, decided the man would keep for a while, went out in to the dining room, and from there into the kitchen. He found a back stairway and started up. The treads, he noticed, had recently been shellacked and shiny except for some dull, whitish spatters where somebody had spilled some water and hadn't wiped it up immediately. On the seventh step, he paused, squatted precariously to look at a thin, curved shard of glass that might have fallen from a shattered watch crystal or broken eyeglass. He straightened, climbed to the top of the stairs, whistling tunelessly to dispell the lonely quiet that hung over the old house.

At the head of the stairs he saw a step-ladder, a dented mop bucket with a drop or two of dirty water in the bottom, a mop and cleaning rags. Everywhere there was a smell of soap and floorwax. Hall windows were sparkling.

Fells kept opening doors until he found the attic stairs, went on up, his eyes on the tie and jack rafters that formed the steeply pitched roof. At the top of the steps he stopped whistling.

Al Wartz was hanging by the neck from a noose in a length of clothesline attached to a tie rafter. His new-looking brown oxfords cleared the floor by about four inches. His blond hair, always thick and rather long, had fallen across his eyes.

Fells, his jaw set tight, threaded his way between old trunks and discarded furniture until he was within a yard of the hanging man. There was dried blood on Al's big square chin. On the floor was a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, one lens cracked and the other completely shattered. A brass fireplace poker with blood-stains on the handle was leaning against a wood packing box piled high with books.

Fells turned and went back to the stairs. His thighs trembled and he had a queasy feeling in his stomach. When he got down onto the ground floor, he found

Tweed-suit exactly where he'd dropped. Maurice Groover had come to, had boosted himself up onto the loveseat where he sat beside Roberta's open purse. He was snuffling into a crimsoned handkerchief, and his round blue eyes reproached Fells.

"You're a fine friend!" was what he tried to say, but through clogged nostrils it came out "fide fred."

Fells said coldly: "Oh, I don't know. You started it. I finished it." He moved on into the adjoining room, the library, where he knew the telephone was. He did not immediately pick up the handset but went over to the glass-fronted case against the wall that housed Al Wartz's collection of small arms. There was a conspicuous gap between a .22 Woodsman and a S & W revolver of the same calibre.

"Hey, Maurice," Fells called. "Just a second."

Groover came into the library, his handkerchief still held to his nose. Fells showed him the big automatic he'd taken from Tweed-suit, pointed to the vacancy in the gun case. "This where this goes?" he asked.

"I dote dough. Where's Uncle Al?"

"In the attic." Fells put the automatic in his belt and went over to the phone. "Al's dead," he said softly. He watched the fat boy sink into a brown leather chair and cover his face with his hands. Then glanced at the cover of the phone directory for the number of Police Headquarters, and dialed.

"Lieutenant Vesper, please," he said. Then to Groover: "We'll have to tell it straight now. You see that, don't you? About that stewbum who died in the window across the street being Al's brother."

"Was—was Uncle Al . . . Murdered?" the fat boy asked through his hands.

"Looks that way. But with a poker and a length of clothesline, Maurice. That's not sense. Not with all these firearms in the house."

And then Fells had Saul Vesper on the wire.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Rich Widow

IT WAS exactly two o'clock in the afternoon. Fells, in his booking agency office in the Curtis Building, looked up from the unopened letter on his desk. Roberta Wartz opened the hall door a little way—just far enough to slip into the room—closed it quietly.

When Fells swiveled around with the idea of getting up, Roberta sat down on his lap and slipped an arm about his shoulders. "Kiss me, Fellsy."

He obliged.

She tilted her head and stared at the letter on Fells' desk. "Albert?"

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Fells nodded.

"What's in it?"

"I don't know. I just got in, and I haven't opened it." He stared at her lovely face a moment. "Did you know your husband was dead?"

She closed and opened her eyes slowly. "You told me this morning."

"*I* did?"

"Yes. You got me out of bed at five o'clock to tell me. Don't you remember, you nice little man, you?"

Fells banged forward in his swivel chair. "Now wait a second. I said your ex was X-ed, didn't I?"

She smiled a little. "I knew what you meant. You meant Dicky, the one in the window."

"Call him Dicky, Lazarus, or Richard Wartz, he'd still be your ex-husband. I'm talking about Al."

She said, "I'm not married to Al," just like that.

Fells stared at her. He discovered his mouth was open and closed it. He said: "And Al was worried about the voting public discovering his brother was a stewbum and a jailbird, and you two blithely living in sin!"

Roberta's color depened. "You don't understand. Didn't Maurice tell you?"

"You bet your sweet life I don't. And Maurice didn't."

"We just found out three days ago that my divorce from Richard Wartz wasn't valid. It wasn't a divorce at all. When we decided to break up, I made the mistake of giving Richard the money to get the divorce. I gave him five hundred dollars I'd borrowed from Albert. All he did was buy a forged document—I guess they come cheaper, so he could keep the rest of the money—and it wasn't legal at all. Just a piece of paper and the judge who was supposed to have signed it doesn't exist, so I'm not legally married to Albert. So that's why I came to you, Fellsy. You've got to help me, because I guess maybe the police are looking for me—"

"You can say that again!"

"And if you could sort of keep me out of circulation until they find the murderer, maybe all this about the fake divorce won't get into the papers. It wouldn't do my career any good, and I'll have to go back to singing to earn a living now, won't I?"

Which would have been an all right idea—if she could sing. He asked: "That's why you moved into the St. Charles? Because you'd found out you weren't legally married to Al?"

She stared down at the toe of a gray pump. "Oh, I was going to leave Albert anyway, because I can't see any sense to living in a crummy old house just because you're a man of the pee—pul when actually you're filthy rich."

"Just how filthy?"

"Maybe a hundred thousand. That's rich to me." She fiddled with the clasp of the gray suede purse she was carrying. "Albert didn't leave a will. That was one of those things he was always putting off. If—if Albert was killed before Richard was, would I be a rich widow then, Fellsy?"

He didn't answer but stared at her, slightly awed by her complete callousness. Then he asked abruptly: "Where does Travens come in on this?"

"Travens?"

"The tough lad in the tweed suit who had you open Al's door for Maurice Groover and I. His name's Travens, it turns out. He and Richard ran in the same mob out west. Then Richard sold out to the D.A. for a soft rap, and Travens went up for a long time. Travens admitted to Saul Vesper that he'd intended to square things with Richard, but claims he didn't stick Richard with that bill spike."

"Oh," she said, remembering. "I never saw *him* before. After you'd told me on

the phone that Richard was dead, I thought I'd better go have a talk with Albert. When I got to Albert's door, this —this—what was his name?"

"Travens."

"This Travens came up onto the porch behind me and put a gun in my back. He made me open the door and stay in front of him while we went all through the house looking for Albert—" She swallowed. "We—we found him. In the attic. I—Travens was after money, because he said Richard had told him about the fake divorce papers. Travens wanted to get out of town in a hurry, and what he'd had in mind was blackmailing Albert, because of the phony divorce. He tried to get money out of me, then, and took my purse—"

"You say Travens had the gun *before* he entered the house?" Fells interrupted.

"Why, yes. There on the porch, he had the gun. That's just what I told you."

Fells laced fingers back of his small blond head and looked at the ceiling. "And you want me to get you under cover until this blows over, huh?"

She smiled brightly. "Please, Fellsy."

"O.K.," he decided suddenly. He reached into his pocket and brought out a key which he handed to the girl. He took a scrap of paper and scribbled his own address on it. "Maybe you'd better tell Mrs. Sandorf, my landlady, that you're my sister. She's a fairly broad-minded old—uh, woman."

Roberta put the key and the address in her purse. She got up, stooped over Fells. "I've got the shivers again," she said softly. "Cure them."

He cured them. Roberta sauntered to the door of the office, glanced back, smiling. "Maybe you ought to marry me, Fellsy. I like you."

"That's fine," he said dryly. He might have reminded her that she'd liked both of the Wartz boys too. Love, he thought, was something she didn't know anything about.

She said: "I'd be a rich widow, wouldn't I, if Albert died first? You've got to think about such things, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, "you've got to thing about such things."

HE WATCHED her go out of the office. When the door was closed, he picked up the unopened letter. Roberta had instantly identified the heavy black handwriting as that of Al Wartz. The stamp had been cancelled that same morning, 6:30 at Substation A. Fells tore open the flap, took out a sheet of white bond which bore a typewritten note and was signed *Albert Wartz*. He read the note through twice, was starting on it a third time, when the door of his office was flung open and Lieutenant Saul Vesper tramped into the room. Vesper kicked the door shut so violently that the frosted glass rattled in its frame.

"Where's Mrs. Wartz?" Vesper demanded and plugged at Fells with an accusing forefinger.

Cold sweat started crawling out of Fells' armpit. "Didn't you try the St. Charles, like I told you?"

Saul Vesper's eyes narrowed. "You know damned well she isn't in the St. Charles. She checked out early this morning, and I happen to know you're the guy who tipped her off. According to the boy on the St. Charles switchboard, you phoned her about five o'clock and told her that her husband had been killed. That means that you actually knew Councilman Albert Wartz was dead before five, yet you didn't report until nine-thirty."

Fells put the letter down and folded his hands on the desk to conceal their unsteadiness. "Now, wait a minute. The boy at the St. Charles switchboard may

have big ears, but his memory is slippery. I did not say that Mrs. Wartz's husband had been killed. I said her *ex*-husband, meaning Richard 'Lazarus' Wartz, the rumpot in Cassway's window. Maybe, because Mrs. Wartz moved into the St. Charles, rumor had it that she'd divorced Albert. That would account for the statement you got from the switchboard boy."

Saul Vesper sat down in the chair that Roberta Wartz had recently warmed. His long face was a little pale—the pallor of tiredness. After a moment, Fells asked: "Have you got your Wartzs straight in your mind, Lieutenant?"

Vesper's nod was glum.

"Then—" Fells' lips twisted into one of his rare smiles, "I got news for you. The switchboard boy accidently hit it right on the nose. Roberta Wartz was never legally divorced from the rumpot in Cassway's window. She's the rumpot's widow—not the councilman's. So what the hell do you want Roberta for? Aren't you happy with poor old Cedric and this tough baby—Travens?"

Saul Vesper was not happy with anybody. He could not, at the moment, have been happy with himself. He got up, paced to the wall where he stared at the photo of a fan dancer in action but with no indication that he appreciated her talents. He turned toward the desk.

"On the level, Fells, I don't think Cedric Jones did it. For a while I thought maybe we had two killers. I thought maybe the rumpot slipped out of the window someway and hanged his brother. But that padlock and hasp made the opening from Cassway's window a one-way street. Somebody could get in, but nobody could have got out without breaking glass. Unless Jonesy is a lot smarter than I think he is, he didn't kill the rumpot. Because I finally picked off that wax seal that was over the padlock keyhole. It's a duplicate—not the original seal. It was cast in some kind of a damned matrix and stuck on the padlock with household cement. Cedric Jones wouldn't have done it that way—not when he could get in and out by means of the gimmick. Unless, as I said, he was smart enough to use the duplicate just to throw me off the track."

"So you've ruled out Jonesy," Fells said. "What about Travens?"

"I've got him on armed robbery. But if he killed the councilman, why would he risk sticking around the scene of the crime that way? We know that poor Al died sometime before five and probably not earlier than two. We can hold the rumpot killing closer than that—say, two-thirty to three, while Jonesy was down at the lunchroom."

"Well," Fells suggested, "how do you like the fat boy, Maurice Groover? I phoned him at about five o'clock, and he was on the wire before the second ring was over. Maybe he just gets up early."

Vesper grunted. "I'm going to talk with him some more. But the baby I'd like to get hold of is Mrs.—" He hesitated a moment, his mouth open. "Yah, she *is* Mrs. Wartz. Mrs. Richard Wartz. And I think you're just the guy who knows where she is."

Fells said hastily: "What's really eating you is that you don't know which Wartz brother died first. Until you know, you can't tell which way Al's money is going to go, and so you can't latch onto a motive." He picked up the letter he had just opened. "Try this on your melodian."

Vesper scowled at the typewritten note a moment and then read aloud. "'Dear Fells: I don't know why the hell I can't get you on the phone, unless that landlady of yours has plugged the bell. Anyway, I'm writing to tell you that I have just witnessed the murder of my

unconscious brother in the window across the street. I know the identity of the killer. I want the information I have to reach the police, but I am afraid my own emotion would betray the relationship we are trying to hide. I'd like you to act for me in this matter. Contact me as soon as possible.' "

Vesper looked up. "Then somebody killed Al Wartz to keep him quiet. The councilman died *after* the rumpot."

"Yes, it says here in elite type," Fells scoffed. "Anybody can poke a typewriter. The signature could be forged or traced."

"Yeah, but what about the pen-and-ink address on the envelope?"

Fells shrugged. "Maybe Al did intend to drop me a line and had addressed the envelope before writing the letter. He might have wanted to give me hell for not getting that act out of Cassway's window as I promisd him I would. If the address on the envelope is a forgery, it's clever enough to fool—"

Fells choked that off. He practically strangled on it. He let himself go into a paroxysm of coughing that lasted as long as he could make it last. And then he looked at Saul Vesper, found Vesper's eyes narrow, suspicious, and menacing.

"You really knocked yourself out that time, didn't you, little Fells? You were going to say that Mrs. Wartz recognized the handwriting on the envelope. Since that letter couldn't have been delivered until this afternoon, Mrs. Wartz was here. She's probably here right now."

Fells sat there in his chair while Vesper got up and went to the closet. He opened the door, looked inside, came out, and slammed the door. He wheeled once more to the desk.

"Where is she?"

Fells said in a strangled whisper: "Let's talk this over some more, Lieutenant. What killed Al Wartz, anyway?"

"The same damned thing that'll get you one of these days—a broken neck!" Saul said. "I'm just the guy to break it for you, too. Where's Mrs. Wartz?"

"I thought that's what it was—a broken neck," Fells said, the steadiness of his voice incongruous with the trembling of his hands. "Sometimes, when they hang, it's strangulation, isn't it, especially it there's not much of a drop? You'd think that's what it would have been in this instance, if the cuncilman was first bobbed on the head and then strung up. You'd think—"

Saul Vesper lunged and grabbed Fells' coat lapels. He lifted Fells bodily from the chair, jerked him toward the door. "Get your hat, little man. You're going to have a busy day. We're going out to that rattrap you live in. I've got a hunch we'll find Mrs. Wartz out there."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Dead on Arrival

THEY were in the back seat of Saul Vesper's car. The lieutenant told the cop at the wheel to take it fast but lay off the siren.

"I'm not going to give that baby any advance notice," Vesper said grimly. "Councilman Wartz was a white guy. The way I feel about it, she might just as well have knocked off somebody in the department."

Ash trembled off Fells' cigarete. "She didn't kill him."

"Who the hell else? You don't think the nephew Groover did it, do you?"

"The fat boy didn't kill the councilman either," Fells insisted.

"You bet he didn't. She did, and I can prove it. And you, you weasel-brained ten percenter, you're going along as accessory after the fact!"

Fells' lips, slightly blue in the draft that was sucked into the rapidly moving car, were set in a thin, hard line.

Vesper laughed harshly. "You know where that bill spike came from? Off Mrs. Wartzs' desk upstairs in the councilman's house. She kept the grocery bills on it. And I can prove she's the baby who duplicated the wax seal on Jonesy's trick padlock."

Fells gave the other man a quick, sidelong glance. Vesper saw it and smiled triumphantly.

"Didn't know that, did you?"

Fells didn't say anything. He pinched the cigarette butt out of his mouth, rolled down the window glass, flipped it out. They had less than two blocks to go. If Roberta Wartz was there when they arrived—and he didn't know any reason why she wouldn't be—he was going to have to talk fast and think faster. There was Vesper and then there was the gun missing from Al Wartz' collection. Fells didn't know but what he was going to have a hell of a time.

He said: "According to you, Lieutenant, Roberta first killed the rumpot and then the councilman. You think she was dumb enough to do it in that order, when she could have knocked off the councilman first and then had a chance to collect on Albert's dough through her undisolved marriage to his surviving brother, even if the brother didn't survive very long."

"Hell, she was sore at the rumpot," Vesper explained. "She was seeing red, not money. He wormed her into a spot where she committed bigamy. She wanted to square accounts for those phony divorce papers he'd passed off on her. That's motive enough for me. I've seen them flimsier. Then she knocked off poor Al because he was a witness—"

"Conking the councilman on the head with the poker first, then lugging him all the way to the attic to swing from a rope!" Fells said ironically. "I tell you, Lieutenant, you've got the thing bassackwards. That note to me was a phony to preclude the notion that the councilman might have died before the rumpot. If you really wanted to catch yourself a killer, you'd make like Richard 'Lazarus' Wartz died legitimately, from alcoholism. Then—"

"What the hell kind of a paradox is that?" Vesper interrupted. "Anyway, the rumpot died from too much bill spike in his heart. The bleeding was internal. And I've caught myself a murderer, little Fells, so you can just butt out of this."

The police car had pulled up in front of the crumbling three-story red brick house, and Vesper nipped Fells' coat sleeve, his smile broad but not necessarily nice. "Let's go on in. You might as well face the music. I don't give a damn in what order the Wartz dame killed them—I just know that she did."

They got out. Vesper told his driver to stick with the car, then kept close to Fells going up the short approach walk. Fells asked: "Have you got a gun?"

"What makes you think I'd need one?"

So Vesper didn't have a gun. But somebody else did. Somebody had a gun that had come from Al Wartz' collection. Fells crinkled his small face into a grimance as they started up the steps from the dingy lower hal.

"Yoo-hoo, Mr. Fells—"

Fells looked down over the banister, saw Mrs. Sandorf's frowzy head. "Yoo-hoo to you, Mrs. Sandorf."

Mrs. Sandorf said: "I didn't know you had a sister, Mr. Fells. I've never seen her before."

Fells said: "I've got a lot of things you've never seen." Which seemed to take care of Mrs. Sandorf. They went on up, Fells' shoes loaded with lead and Saul Vesper chuckling softly. The door of Fells' room was ajar, and he tapped on it.

"Sis, are you decent?"

Sis didn't answer. Vesper impatiently pushed the door open and hauled Fells into the room. There was no sign of Roberta Wartz, no indication that she had ever been there except a lingering odor of expensive perfume which Vesper sniffed with a good deal of satisfaction.

"Sis must have just left," Fells said. "There's no use waiting around."

Vesper opened Fells' closet. "Here's her coat. I think we'll wait." He went over to the edge of the bed and sat down. He lighted a cigarette, wagged out the match as the door opened and Roberta came in. She'd been to the bath at the other end of the hall, Fells decided. She was in skirt and white blouse, and her purse tucked up under her arm. Her shining eyes swerved to Saul Vesper, came back to Fells. Her face put on a beautiful smile.

"Buddy, you nice old thing!" she crowed and threw herself into Fells' arms.

"Sis!" She was shivering again. He held her close and she stooped for the indicated treatment. Fells was thinking that they were carrying this brotherly-sisterly kiss too far, when somebody spoke up from the hall.

"She's not his sister. That's Roberta Wartz, Lieutenant Vesper."

Vesper said: "I know. I was just being big hearted with the little man."

Fells broke away from Roberta. Not far away, because she was right back clinging to him again and shivering, but far enough so that he could see Maurice Groover standing in the door. The fat boy had on a loose gabardine topcoat, and as he stepped over the threshold his round eyes got all over the room at once.

He said: "I figured if I followed Fells, I'd find you, Roberta."

"You figured right," Vesper said. "If you'll get your coat on, Mrs. Wartz, we'll go downtown. You and Fells."

Fells pushed away from Roberta Wartz, got over to the bed where Vesper sat. He dropped a hand on Vesper's knee. "Just five minutes, Lieutenant. Just let me hog the stage for that long."

Vesper's long face was adamant. "Get your coat, Mrs. Wartz. I got your other purse—the one you left at the councilman's house—at Headquarters."

"Fellsy!" Roberta sobbed. "Do something!"

Fells, his face close to Vesper's, said: "Circle six five four nine two, remember? A cute little redhead, you called her, and she danced at the Fraternal Order of Police party. Mrs. Vesper doesn't know about that, does she?"

Vesper's face flushed. "Damn you—" He took a deep breath and held it. "All right. So I'm a sap, but let's keep it just among us four. You've got your five minutes."

Fells indicated the only chair. "Sit down, Roberta. Groover—well, I guess you'll just have to stand."

The fat boy said: "That's all right with me." He leaned against the door frame.

FELLS sat down on the bed beside Vesper, his small left foot close to Vesper's big right foot. "I talk for five minutes, and you keep your big yap shut."

"Well, get the hell on with it," Vesper crabbed. "You've been winding up for five minutes now!"

Fells drew a shallow breath and his eyes shifted to Maurice Groover. He said: "You didn't kill your Uncle Al, did you, Maurice?"

The dimpled face paled. "You bet your life I didn't."

"You didn't kill Uncle Richard 'Lazarus' Wartz," Fells stated.

"No. No, I didn't."

"I could have told you that," Vesper broke in. "But *she* did." He pointed to Roberta, and Roberta cowered back into

the chair and whimpered: "Fellsy! Fellsy!"

"She didn't," Fells said. "And Vesper, these five minutes are mine." He lifted the heel of his left foot, swung it over, and brought it down firmly on Vesper's instep. Fells' heart was up in his throat, stifling back. This *had* to work.

"Neither Maurice nor Roberta killed either of the Wartz brothers. You know damned well, Lieutenant, that they didn't kill the rumpot, because—" Fells was talking rapidly, breathlessly now, "the thing that killed Richard 'Lazarus' Wartz was in a bottle—" He increased the pressure on Vesper's foot and his brain hammered, *For cripesake keep your big trap shut if you want to get out of here alive*, and kept right on talking, talking, "and he was dead in Cassway's window from alcoholism before anybody ran that bill spike into his heart. . ."

Somebody in the room drew a breath —not Fells; Fells was talking, and there wasn't time to breathe.

". . . And for that reason, nobody murdered anybody, because Councilman Al Wartz fell down the back stairs and broke his neck. He fell over a mop bucket the cleaning woman had left at the top of the stairs, and the water in the bucket slopped all over the stair treads, accounting for those white marks in the shellac. When Al Wartz fell, he broke his glasses as well as his neck, and he hit his head on one of the steps, got a scalp wound that bled quite a bit before he died. And that was where you found him, wasn't it, Maurice—at the foot of the back stairs?"

The fat in Maurice Groover's face trembled a little. His eyes were very big, like those of a child.

"Isn't that true, Maurice?"

Maurice Groover's head dipped.

"Maurice got to thinking that if his Uncle Al was dead, then Al's brother in the window across the street would come in for a big hunk of Al's estate, since Al, as we know, hadn't made a will. Maurice knew that Roberta wasn't legally married to Al, so she wouldn't come into the thing at all, and the money would go to the collaterals—the rumpot in the window and to the child of Albert's sister, which would be Maurice. But Maurice couldn't see the rumpot having any of the family fortune. Isn't that right?"

Maurice Groover said weakly: "That —that's right. I knew Uncle Al wouldn't want Dick to get any money."

"And if you could kill the rumpot and make it appear as though he'd died *before* the councilman died, you figured you'd be the only surviving heir. So you decided to use the bill spike. I don't think you had much trouble with that padlock on Cassway's window after you got the seal off, and of course you had a pretty close duplicate of the seal ready to stick on in its place."

"That's right," Maurice Groover admitted. "Of course, when I used the bill spike, I didn't know Dick was dead."

"Of course you didn't. And then you rigged the accident in Uncle Al's house to look like murder by hanging. You took the body into the attic, strung it up, figuring that would account for the broken neck. You added the councilman's smashed glasses to the scene for effect, and the poker to account for the cut on Uncle Al's head. You made it look like murder because you thought that would be a lot more convincing in conjunction with the smart trick you were going to pull to make it appear as though the councilman preceded the rumpot in death."

Maurice Groover was openly nodding agreement. He looked almost pleased.

Fells stood up, still addressing Groover. "You sent me a letter which you'd signed with your Uncle's Al signature. He'd already addressed the envelope to me, hadn't he?"

"That's right," Groover admitted. "He was going to write and give you holy hell for not getting that act out of the window, like you promised. I wanted it to appear as though Uncle Al had witnessed Uncle Richard's murder, then it would *have* to appear as though Uncle Richard died first."

"How unspeakably awful!" Roberta gasped.

"Why, what's so awful about it? I didn't commit any crime. They were both dead. You heard what Fells said."

"Yeah," Saul Vesper said quietly. "We all heard what Fells *said*." He stood up. "I got news for you, fat stuff. The rumpot in the window didn't die from too much drink. What was bothering him was too much bill spike, and you're under arrest for murder."

Maurice Groover's mouth fell open, closed, and his face seemed to crumple around it. His right hand shot in his coat pocket for the gun that Fells had feared, the gun that was missing from Al Wartz's collection; the gun Groover couldn't quite reach before Fells had caught Groover's wrist in both hands. Then Vesper moved in with the cuffs, and Groover was struggling and screaming at them, naming them foully. And while Vesper handled the fat boy, Fells trotted out into the hall and down the stairs to get Vesper's man from the car. Mrs. Sandorf presented a minor problem, what with her wanting to know just what was going on in her house, but Fells got away from her and back to his room. Groover was sitting on the bed, and there were tears rolling down his fat cheeks. Roberta, in the chair, was also having a good cry for no good reason that Fells could think of.

Fells, his eyes glistening maliciously, asked Vesper: "What was that evidence you had that Roberta killed the rumpot?"

Vesper glanced at the weeping widow. "Hell, maybe she carries sandwiches in her purse, I don't know. But there were breadcrumbs in that pocketbook of hers that I found on the loveseat in the councilman's house. And if you want to duplicate a wax seal in a hurry, you get some bread and wad it up to work the airholes out, then press it over the original seal and make a matrix. You put melted wax in the bread matrix, and as soon as the wax cools, the bread can be crumbled off."

Fells nodded. "I thought that's what it was. But those crumbs were originally in Maurice Groover's pocket. He and I had been talking about the possibility of duplicating a wax seal, and then, a bit later, when Travens had us at gun-point in Al's house, Maurice suddenly remembered the crumbs in his pocket and objected to being frisked by Travens. In the fight that followed, I let Travens knock Maurice out so I could get a peak into that pocket Maurice was willing to guard with his life. He must have put the crumbs into Roberta's purse while I was up in the attic. That's when he got the gun from his uncle's collection. He'd have knocked me off if he'd had a chance and if he'd suspected that I was wise to him. He's have tried to get us all just now if I hadn't tricked him."

"What I want to know is—am I a rich widow?" Roberta had turned off her tears. She got up from the chair.

"It'll probably come to that," Vesper said, "after the courts and collectors."

"Yes," Fells said. "You may not be filthy rich, but you'll be moderately soiled."

"It's excitement, Fellsy," she said. "That's what it is this time. I just love to go shopping, and I'll get a whole new outfit, all black. Black from the skin out, and I'm terribly fascinating in black. For the funeral, you know . . . But you can kiss me if you want to, Fellsy."

Fells said: "No thanks."

# EAR-WITNESS

**By MAURICE BEAM**

*Malmin raised the gun. "You're making a big mistake," he said.*

MALMIN READ the letter swiftly, laid it down, picked it up, and then read it slowly a second time as he walked to his desk. A consciousness of shock seeped through him, not sudden but deep, the creeping kind of shock that paralyzes.

Someone knew he had killed Herman Choan. The fact held a mystic quality that was ghastly. No one could possibly know—yet someone did.

The typed letter was not threatening. It was almost gentle. Therein lay its coldness.

Gregory Malmin
Attorney-at-Law
Midland Building, City
Sir:

I know everything that occurred after you entered Herman Choan's cigar store on the evening of April 3rd. I know you shot Mr. Choan, murdered him, and then walked from the store as the door locked of itself behind you.

**Malmin thought he was in the clear, till he got a neatly-typed letter describing every move he made in the killing.**

I am waiting for you to do what you should do: confess this terrible crime to the police.

Alice.

Alice. There was no other written notation. From long experience in judging handwriting, Malmin felt sure the writer was indeed a woman.

Malmin's morale was of rubber. Another mood quickly followed his first. This was a hoax, a bad joke played by one of his rowdier acquaintances who had read of Choan's death in the papers.

His flexible lawyer's mind seized on this assumption and imbued it with rationalism. The newspapers had treated Choan's death as a routine item of police reporting. A minor mystery, it had been dropped after the usual references to police investigation, lack of clues and had ended with "police convinced a chance bandit shot Choan as the latter resisted robbery." There was a brief final allusion to Choan's widow.

Indeed, there had been robbery, for Malmin had carefully rifled the cash-register. He had dropped, as if carelessly, a couple of greenbacks on the floor. Not that he wanted the money. A highly successful criminal lawyer, he didn't need it. But its taking had lent credibility to the robbery theory.

For that matter, nothing about the murder was amateurish. Although he had never before killed, Malmin was schooled in the ways of killing as practiced by not a few of his clients. Defending these, he had come to share their lethal knowledge as well as their mental conditioning. Every element in Choan's slaying had been obvious except the motive.

That motive, of course, was to keep Choan from talking as he assuredly would have talked at the hearing on the insurance frauds. Had Choan testified it would have led to Malmin's certain ruin through disbarment, disgrace and a prison term. Choan's life had seemed a small price for positive release from these threats. Without Choan the hearing had come to naught.

In a fit of temper, Malmin crumpled the letter and flung it into the waste-basket. Some crude joker, knowing vaguely of Choan's connection with the insurance case, had directed writing of the letter.

THREE days passed. Malmin's certainty as to the validity of the joker theory became fixed. No one could possibly know of his crime. Hearsay evidence he feared not at all.

An expert at finding legal loopholes, Malmin also was familiar with fallibilities inherent in police procedures. He even knew the personalities involved. Captain George Sloan, homicide chief, had pigeonholed this case beyond doubt. Stolid, slow-moving Sloan was no man to become merely imaginatively inquisitive. Lacking concrete evidence he would waste no time on story-book methods of detection.

Concrete evidence could come only from an eye-witness. There was no eye-witness; there could be none. He examined this carefully.

Before shooting Choan he searched the store casually. After the shooting he searched painstakingly and thoroughly. In the cramped quarters of the small, nook-like store this required no more than a minute. The telephone booth offered the sole possible hiding place. He swung wide the booth door. He was positive on that point. The door squeaked loudly. He had known this even before the night of the killing.

On the fourth day came the second letter from Alice. This one was longer than the first and more carefully worded.

You knew Mr. Choan locked his store at exactly 8:30 each week-day evening, that it was his habit to remain until 9 p. m. to go over his books, that he was a man of fixed habits.

With such knowledge it was easy for you to arrive at the store at 8:28 p. m., to enter to wait while Mr. Choan locked the door from the inside by snapping the catch and then turn to wait on you, the last customer of the day.

So you murdered him behind the door that could not be opened from the outside, but not before you searched the store to make sure no one was there. You even opened the door of the telephone booth and glanced inside, during this tour. Then you were sure. When you left, the store door locked behind you of itself.

I shall not wait much longer.

Alice.

Malmin sat holding the letter. His secretary rang his desk phone but he did not hear. Like an automaton he drew out a handkerchief and touched his brow, noting hazily that his fingers shook. He heard the faint rattle of his own breath. Herman Choan's death rattle had been similar as throat tissues relaxed. Intense fear now brought the same such horrid relaxation to his own throat.

Again he read. What got him was the allusion to the telephone booth. Without that, this second message from Alice could also be rationalized. With that, doubt left his mind. Only an eye-witness could know that he had opened the booth door, glanced in and then moved past the high desk behind which Herman Choan's body lay.

All this flashed through his memory as the lawyer searched frantically for some weakness in his accuser's position or some forgotten strength in his own. Probing with the ferret-like directionalism he used on witnesses, at the end of several minutes of agonized cogitation he grew calmer.

The thing was simply a matter of logic, as all things were. He began to count methodically: One: despite appearance there had been no eye-witness; that remained a positive impossibility. Two: nevertheless, there had been a witness as the second letter clearly showed in its intimate description. Three: the witness had not been inside the store but outside. Four: the murder had been heard, not seen. Five: the hearing had been possible only over the telephone.

Choan had stood near the high desk and on the desk was a cradle phone. Someone had been on the line talking to Choan when he, Malmin, entered. Cleverly enough, Choan had not closed the line. A lead pencil or a nail file, probably, had been inserted under the cradle to hold it up even while the receiver was at rest. A simple trick, that, readily accomplished.

An ear-witness! Malmin, cool now, examined this closely. It was admissible evidence; it could be damaging evidence, for a portion of his last meeting with Choan had been audible.

He had greeted Choan with bogus pleasantry. Lastly he had said: "Choan, you're making a big mistake by insisting on testifying. It will get you nothing. Can't I change your mind?"

"My mind is the same," Choan had answered. "And I want none of your bribe money. Is that all, Malmin?" Choan was a round little man with eyes that were wide and direct, with a chin that was strong. Malmin, discerning the ultimate in Choan's decision, shot without warning.

Now Malmin knew relief. His course was clear. The identity of the ear-witness was easily guessed. Choan had left a widow. Malmin moved rapidly to the outer office and consulted a city directory. In a moment he found it: "Choan, Herman; tobacconist; wf., Alice, 1236 Sanson St. . . ."

Malmin reached the address at slightly past seven that evening. It was a tiny, neat cottage built well back on the lot, isolated from neighboring homes. Geometrically arranged flower-beds lent an air of quaint formality to the yard. It was the typical abode of just such a

humdrum, middle-aged couple as the Choans had been.

There was a bright light on the narrow porch and this made Malmin feel uncomfortable as he rang the bell and awaited an answer. It came quickly. A slender, gray-haired woman opened the door. Before he could speak she said quietly: "You are Malmin. Come in." She stood aside as he entered.

HE WAS startled. It was as if he had been expected. Instantly he rationalized this. Of course. She had assumed he would eventually call on her, after he had learned her identity.

They came to the living-room and she gestured for him to sit down at a table. She took a chair on the opposite side. There was a light on the table, a bright one like the light on the porch.

At once she said: "I've been expecting you. I was sure you'd discover who wrote the letters."

The words put Malmin at ease. His thinking had been accurate. Besides, she had erased the need for useless preliminaries. He could proceed with his coup, one that would bring him final and lasting security, whatever its final nature.

"Mrs. Choan—" He spoke softly, persuasively, in a voice trained to soothe antagonisms— "You believe I killed your husband. I came here to try and make you see you are wrong. Whatever I may be—and I lay no claim to perfection—I am no murderer. Someone shot Herman. I did not. I think the police are right in directing the search toward a casual bandit. Such robberies occur every day."

She was watching his face intently, weighing each word. Although the impassive eyes showed nothing Malmin was sure his powers of conversation were having an effect.

She said then: "Go on. You are entitled to speak in answer to my accusations. Did I miss any detail of what happened in the store?"

He smiled. "Apparently you didn't. Your husband's killer must have acted exactly as you said. Even the squeaking of the phone booth door—you must have excellent ears to have caught that over the telephone."

"I thought you'd remember the door."

"I do. I have been in your husband's store many times, as one of his customers. I knew him well. We even had mutual interests, about which we did not always agree. Our disagreements, however, were academic, not personal."

"Are you referring to the fact that he had learned all about your system of forcing payments on false insurance claims and that he would have testified to that if he had lived?"

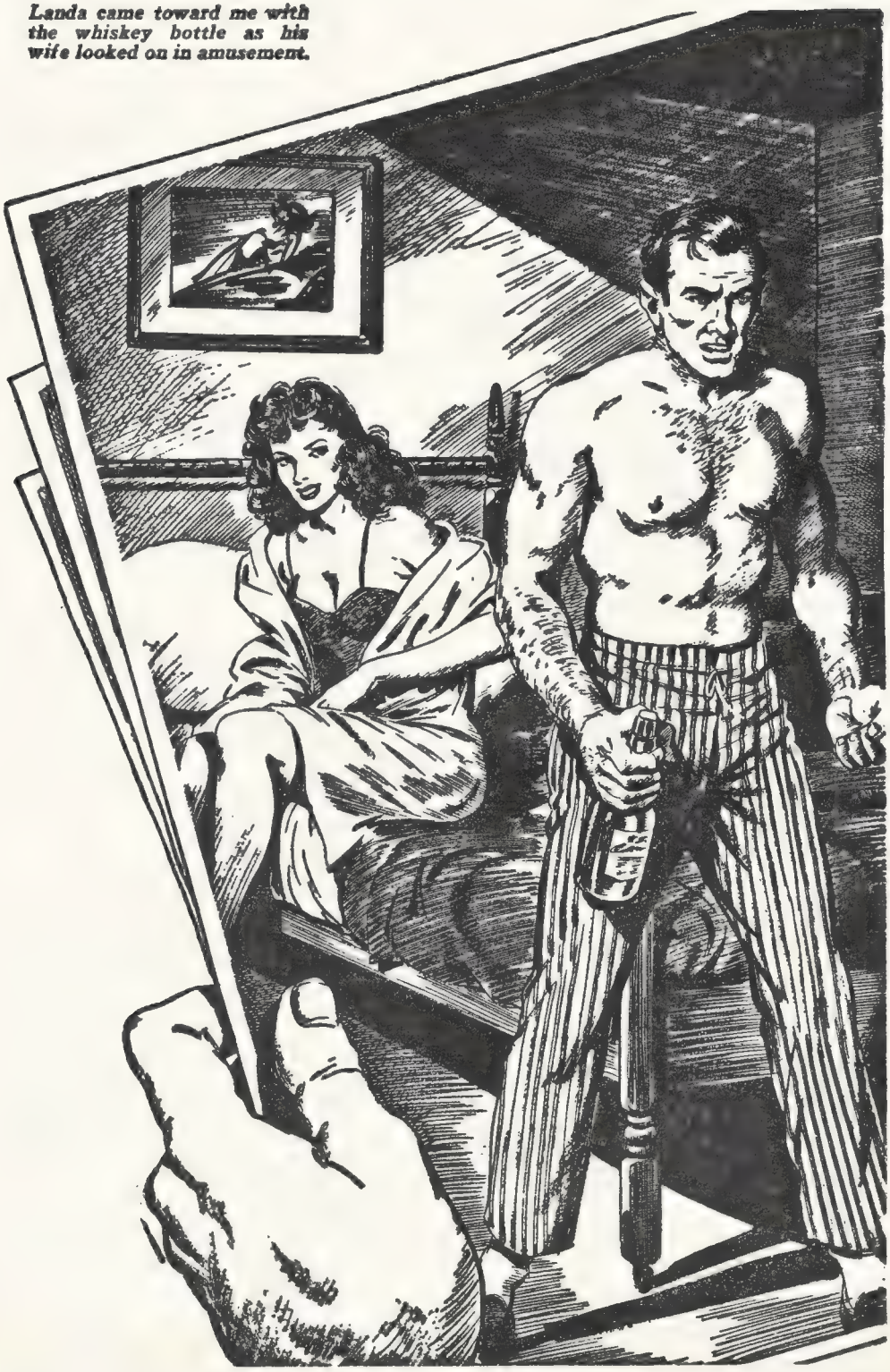
Malmin kept his face immobile. This was exactly the information he was seeking, the main reason for his visit here. Mrs. Choan knew about the insurance frauds. Therefore she had understood references to the hearing as she listened to the conversation in the store just prior to the murder. Such evidence would convict him.

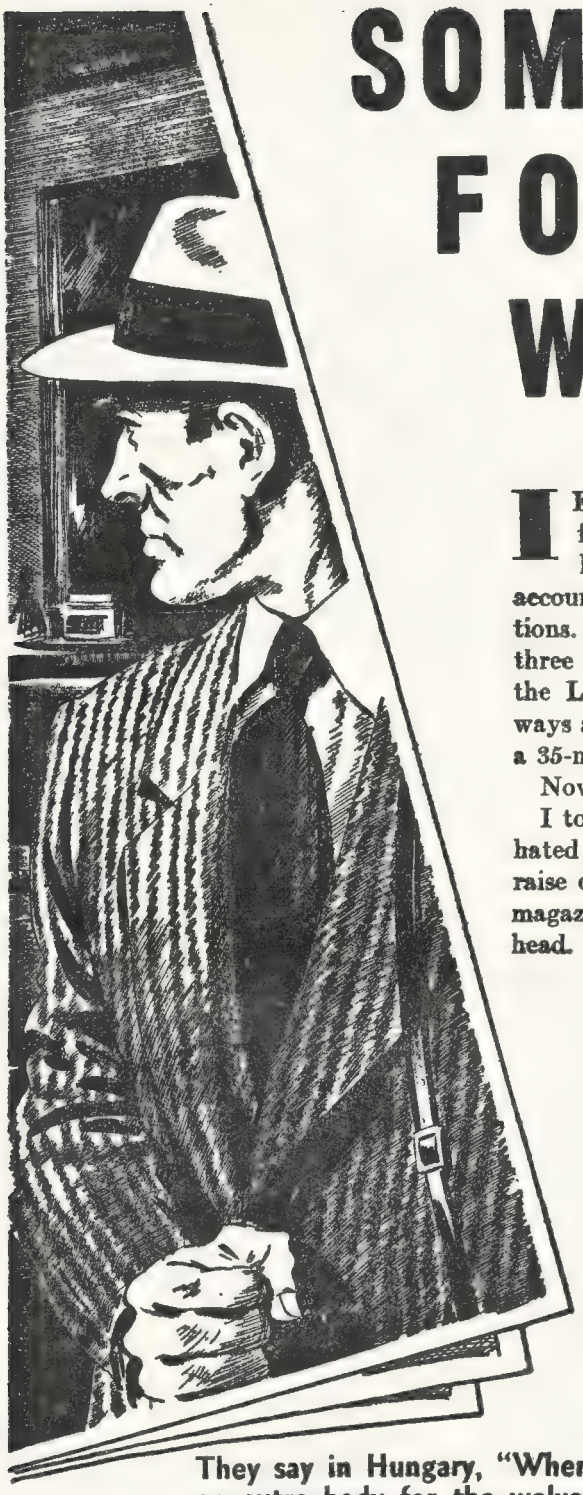
As before, Malmin instantly comprehended the ultimate. As before, he gave no warning. The small pistol was out of his pocket and pointing at her heart. His muscles began to tighten.

But the shot did not come from Malmin's gun. It came from a doorway beyond Mrs. Choan's right shoulder. Malmin felt sudden, stunning shock in his upper arm. His pistol fell from his hand and he surged to his feet. In that instant he was aware of Mrs. Choan. She sat quite still, her face pale but her eyes keen upon him. A voice not hers said: "Stand still, Malmin. A wing shot. Lucky. Or was it?" And Captain George

*(Continued on page 130)*

*Landa came toward me with the whiskey bottle as his wife looked on in amusement.*





# SOMEBODY FOR THE WOLVES

I KEPT thirty—to split with Lazy for expenses—and shoved the three hundred through the wicket to the account of Gorgey & O'Meara Productions. There's a hundred and seventy-three motion-picture studios listed in the L. A. yellow-book, but there's always a hundred of them don't even own a 35-millimeter camera.

Now it was a hundred and one.

I took my time back to the office. I hated to tell Lazy that was all I could raise on the Eyemo, including the extra magazines and the tripod with the gyro head. I picked up a *Reporter* on the

By

**ROBINSON MacLEAN**

**They say in Hungary, "When you go on a sleighride, take an extra body for the wolves." But Eddie O'Meara never expected to play the role of wolf-bait, Hollywood-style.**

corner by the Pageant Building, and ran down the gossip columns while I walked up. In the Pageant Building you've got to walk up. It's a front on Vine Street for four floors of hutches filled with characters with their back against the wall.

Like all last week, the stairs were filled with sour notes escaping from the second-floor piano where a citizen named Rocco is struggling with a steal from Sibelius. "Song Writer & Composer" his sign says. The signs don't mean anything. Our door still says "Laszlo Gorgey & Eddie O'Meara, Producers." Only we haven't produced.

Sure, sure, we have the documentary. I shot it and Lazy cut it, when I first came out of the Navy and we went partners. We sank three thousand in it. It stayed sunk. Making documentaries isn't so tough, but selling them, real ones, is like unloading a one-way ticket to a leper colony. Ask Pare Lorentz. Ask anybody. Only ask before you start shooting.

I looked in our darkroom, but Lazy wasn't there. Only a couple of four-five stills on Lazy's special plates, the ones he uses for retouching. Nobody can beat Lazy when it comes to cutting negatives together, pushing emulsion around, still or motion-picture. Hell, he could retouch Wallace into the Republican Party.

I felt under the enlarger for the company bottle and found the note around it, fastened with a rubber band.

"New angle!" his big, scratchy writing said. "Got maybe a release for our picture with Emkay. Wait for phone. Laszlo."

Another lousy Hungarian angle. I swallowed a mouthful, then jerked the bottle out into the light. Lazy'd been buying slivovitz again. I thought a minute, then I took another swallow.

I sat down and thumbed through the *Reporter,* tasting the musty sting of the slivovitz and smelling the flat sourness of the sun on the tar of the parking lot outside. At the tail-end of a column of tattle I ran across a mention of Emkay.

"For a fortnite," it said, "Assistant Directors Danny Landa and Jack Martins at Emkay have waited word from Uncle Mike Kalapos on who moves in behind the Short Subjects desk, empty since McCaskill quit. Word is out the fix is in on one of the boys. Uncle Mike has been hearing those things."

THAT'S the kind of stuff Lazy calls an angle. We'd been through it oftener than Jolson's been through "Sonny Boy," and I was getting ready to wrestle another round with the slivovitz when the phone rang.

"Laszlo speaking," he told me. "It's dynamite. Come quick."

"Where?"

"Melinda Apartments, Las Palmas by Yucca. The Graphic you need, but come quick."

You can't argue with a Hungarian. He hung up when I tried. I checked the Graphic, made sure the holders were loaded and the bulbs and the light tripod were in the case. Then I finished the slivovitz, slung the case over my shoulder, and waded down the stairs through Rocco vs. Finland.

Hell, we'd been trying to peddle our short to Emkay for six months. We'd never make it from the corner of Yucca and Las Palmas.

It was a court apartment with one big pepper-tree and a dozen dingy cribs. Lazy hadn't given me any name or any number, so I set the camera down and went along the nameplates, looking for anything that might ring the bell. It was number seven at the back where Lazy jerked the door open.

"The camera, the camera, the camera," he said, looking like the Eighth

Dwarf—the one they threw out of Snow White for epilepsy. I got the camera and we went in.

"Come by the bedroom," he said, excited like it was Bank Night in a harem. It turned out to be a dark-haired creep, maybe thirty-two, sitting on the edge of a mused bed in the bottom of his pajamas.

He was holding a couple of fingers of drink in a tumbler. The bottle on the nightstand said it was whiskey.

"This is my partner, Eddie O'Meara, Mr. Landa," Lazy told him.

"It's about time," Landa answered. "Set up and I'll get Fay." He went out, wavering a little. For my money he could have broken his neck.

I racked up the Graphic while Lazy briefed me. A little montage job, he said. He gave me his dividers and two contacts, night flash shots, medium-close singles, one a man, one a girl, made at a swimming party.

"You make the shot here, and I do a little retouch," he said. "Cut out the heads from the negative. Set in the heads from the other two in the swim suits. Then we got a guarantee release. Only measure this shot good on the glass with the dividers, so the heads match perfect."

I told him to go back off and run through it again.

Finally I got it. He wanted a bed shot of this Landa, and some girl. When I got it back to the office he was going to switch heads. Cut out Landa. Cut in the guy in the trunks. The same with the girl.

I checked the lighting on the pool shots, and saw it'd be simple to match. They were made with a single flash, held down over the lens. The night sky was so black in the contact you could tell the negs would be just clear gelatine.

"O.K.," I told Lazy. I stuck the contacts on the back of the Graphic, below the ground-glass, so they'd be easy to match.

"Remember, two shots here, for protection," he said. "Two good shots."

"I always make two, Mister Goldwyn. Chase out and get the cast in and stop bothering me."

"They come in in a minute. I go to the office now. Be sure to bring me two plates, Eddie. Two good plates." I was testing the flash batteries and I didn't bother to answer. I heard the outside door close, then somebody came in.

It was Landa and the hippy little redhead he had married in a moment of poor judgment. She wore a white terry dressing gown and was half-crocked.

"How do you want it?" I asked him.

"Never mind how I want it. I'll handle the pose, you handle the camera. I don't want any slips, either. Come on, Fay, get out of that damn robe."

She reached for a girlish giggle but didn't connect.

"In front of a strange man, honey?" she said, but didn't wait for any answer. She shrugged off the robe and stood there in her pants and brassiere, trying to keep her balance. She wasn't half-crocked. She was lit to the gills.

"Hey, look, Danny, he's blushing," she said. She sat on the edge of the bed, weaving. "Look, Danny, he's blushing. The nice photographer. He's blushing." She screwed up her face and I finally made out she was trying to wink. I kept busy with the camera.

I checked with the dividers, trying to match up the redhead against the girl in the pool shot, but the gal on the bed kept swaying in and out of focus and screwing her head around, coy.

"Hold her still," I told Landa. He went around the bed and sat on it, with one arm around her.

I had to move the camera three times before I got the sizes matched perfect, and I then made a last check with the di-

viders before I shoved in the plate.

That was the first time I looked at the face of the girl in the shot beside the pool—as a face. She was about the same general build as the souse on the Simmons, but she was different as the fourteen of spades.

A nice kid, she looked like, with a friendly smile and the bathing suit showed a body that was curved crisp and fresh, like a new radish.

"You going to take all afternoon?" Landa grumbled. "I thought you were a professional."

"When you're ready, I am," I told her. "Is that the pose?"

"This ought to do it," he said.

I made the two plates and lifted the camera off the tripod. I took a good look at the kids in the pool shots when I peeled them off. The boy was a crew-cut kid with a tan, not over twenty-five. And the Bradley girl was five million dollars in new one-dollar bills.

Landa came toward me with the whiskey bottle as his wife looked on in amazement.

"Tell Gorgey I'll be around in the morning for the plate and a print," he said. "Now let's have a drink."

"I don't drink," I said, picking up the case.

"I been watching you. You haven't smiled since you've been here. Maybe you don't like our little joke. Maybe you don't want my business."

"Skip it," I said. "I don't like anything in Southern California. Let it go at that. If you want the montage in the morning I got to get those plates back to Gorgey."

He cocked his head, and his hands came up a little. I got ready to slip the camera-strap off my shoulder. I was hoping for it. He changed his mind.

"O.K., O'Meara," he said. "You boys make me a nice still, I'll fix a nice release for your short subject."

The redhead was off the bed by this time, waddling toward us.

"You're cute," she said. "He's cute, isn't he, Danny? Don't forget us, huh?"

"I'll remember," I said.

I STOPPED in at a bar on the corner of Wilcox to rinse my mouth out. Then I pulled out the prints of the two kids at the swimming pool. They were just two clean kids, but when Lazy got through, and Uncle Mike Kalapos saw them, they'd be in bed together. The boy would be Jack Martins, Landa's opposition for the job at Emkay. The Bradley girl would be his girlfriend.

If Lazy made the montage, it'd hold up in any court, and all Kalapos' lawyers had to do was wave the morality clause and pull the pin on Martins' contract.

I pushed the contacts back into my pocket and wandered down Cahuenga, turning left on Sunset.

I was remembering something Lazy told me, when I came here first. "In Hungary we got a saying: 'You got to go someplace on a sleighride, you got to take an extra somebody. Somebody for the wolves.' Hollywood's a sleighride."

He was in the darkroom when I got to the office, with a jeweler's glass screwed into his eye working with a scalpel on a slice of emulsion peeled off a plate.

"In an hour come back," he said. "I tell you what happens."

"I could smell it from Yucca Street," I told him. "I'll come back when I'm drunk."

I slammed the door and went down along Vine, toward Santa Monica. Near the corner there's a bar that nobody goes into twice but the winos that latch onto a fast fifteen cents. They'd be high society—the way I felt.

Four bar whiskies calmed me down a little, but I knew we were through, Lazy

and I, and all the way back I was wondering how to tell him. I like the guy.

The door was locked and there wasn't anybody in the office or the darkroom. There was one plate, hung up, with the fan on it, but dry enough to handle. I took it over to the retouching easel and snapped on the light. It was worth twenty or twenty-five thousand, on the Emkay release, and you don't often see that much blackmail on twenty square inches of glass.

It was a Laszlo Gorgey Special. It was perfect.

It was the tussle I'd just taken. Same bodies. Same clinch. But now it was Jack Martins and the Bradley girl, and even on the negative you could tell she had a nicer smile than anything you'd seen since the last time you got a bang out of choir practice.

There wasn't a grain of silver out of line to show where Lazy'd been working. He had clear emulsion to work in with that kind of contour lighting, but the grain wasn't clotted the way it goes on the best copy negatives, and there wasn't a crack or a line or a rough spot or a break in tone to show where he'd slipped one chunk of emulsion out and bevelled the other one in.

I got an idea I wanted to see a big print, and I set the plate in the holder, racked the enlarger all the way up, and fished a sheet of sixteen-twenty glossy out of the paper-bin.

At that height a straight condenser shows up every speck of silver like the letters on a firesale sign, but even while I was printing it, I couldn't locate any trace of Laszlo Gorgey and his dirty little scalpel.

I poked the print into the developer, and watched for it to come up. The outside door opened and closed, and I cut the safety switch that kills the office lights, and pushed the darkroom door back with my foot.

"Come here, Lazy," I said. "We got to talk."

There wasn't any answer and I ran the print through the short-stop and on into the hypo, back up. I covered the tray and put the lights on.

I turned around and said, "What's wrong with you?" to somebody but it wasn't Lazy. I put the lights on and it was the girl.

Not the redhead lush, the other one. Bradley. Sue Bradley. She had a gray plaid skirt and a white shirt. She was—the hell with it, she was everything. Everything tied up in a bright new pink ribbon.

"Are you Mr. Gorgey?" she said. I shook my head.

"The door was open so I just came in. Will he be back? I mean tonight?"

I told her nobody could answer that one but Gorgey. All I wanted was her to go away.

"Does he have a picture for me, Sue Bradley, Melinda Apartments? My roommate told me there was something about a picture."

"I don't know anything about it. What'd she tell you?"

"I couldn't quite understand. She—she wasn't feeling very well. Just something about a picture. She was sort of hysterical, and Mr. Gorgey's card was stuck in her mirror."

The longer I watched her, the madder I got. Hell, you can't spend a lifetime on the defensive.

"Pack up the act, honey," I told her. "Suppose I still believe Little Red Riding Hood, you got to draw the line someplace. Let's hear the commercial, then we can get on with the news."

She didn't speak for a little.

"I guess I've made a mistake," was all she could come out with.

"Sure, you made a mistake," I told her. "Coming to Hollywood. Look, I don't know what you're playing for, or

what team you're playing with, or why, but you're with the wrong people. Keep it up and you'll get your little pinafore dirty."

Then she laughed.

"You're just excited," she said. "You don't know anything about me. Where do you think I ought to go?"

"Anywhere. Duluth. Tacoma. Back home. Whatever you did out at Emkay, it's finished. Finished good."

She laughed again. "You can't prove that. You can't prove any of it."

You never know when the Irish corpuscles are going to muscle in on your brain.

I was talking, and listening to me talk. "What do you want for proof?" I was saying. "Take a look at this picture you wanted. Then get out of here. Go home. Remember I told you to go home. Me. Eddie O'Meara."

I pushed her into the darkroom and jerked the cover off the hypo tray, slapping the print over, face-up on the slab. I could have kicked her in the stomach just as easy.

The color went out of her face and the freckles focussed up sharp, like specks of blood coming through a new bandage. She looked for a long time, then leaned against the enlarger stand and put her head down, across her hands where she was holding on. The back of her neck was shivering, the way kids do when they've been in swimming too long.

"It's not true," she said. She didn't lift her head.

"O.K., so it's not true," I said. "I believe you. But I don't matter. I just used to work here. The studio isn't going to believe you. Or your boy friend, either."

She spun up like a cueball on a masse shot.

"Listen to me, O'Meara, or whatever you call yourself, you've got everything twisted and it's about time we got this straightened out. I don't work for the studios. Any of them. I teach Grade Five at Miramonte School. And Jack Martins isn't my boy friend. He's just a friend. We went to high school together in Oregon. And we went out a couple of times together here. But decently. Like decent people."

"Pay some attention," I said. "I believe you. I told you that. But his studio won't, when they see this picture. Or your school-board when the word gets around. You can fight this kind of frame, but you can't win anything. You'd be crazy to fight."

"Then I'm crazy. I'll fight this until I'm in jail—or you or whoever's back of it."

I watched her so I could remember, then I picked the big print up and pulled the wet paper into shreds and slopped them over in the corner.

"I'm crazy, too," I said. "Watch me spend twenty-five thousand dollars." I reached the plate down, out of the enlarger, and set it emulsion-down across the wet wooden cleats on the cement floor, and ground it with my heel.

"I haven't any money," she said.

"It's for free. It's on Eddie O'Meara. Now get out of here. I got a bellyful of virtue already and I want to get drunk."

I HEARD her footsteps down the hall to the stairs, and I fished my stuff out of the darkroom and our desk. I fished the Graphic out and set it on the desk and put my stuff in the plate-case. It didn't take much room. Our motion picture was on the rewind, where Lazy'd been checking splices. I left it there. I was through with Lazy, and through with pictures, still or motion, blackmail or documentary. I put Lazy's split of the thirty dollars in the bankbook and set it by the camera. Then I got a sheet of five seven out and wrote on the back.

"I wasn't quite sharp for that last angle," I scrawled. "I'll pay you something on account when I'm a rich farmer."

I locked the office and went out onto Vine, with Rocco and Sibelius pushing me from behind, wondering how far twelve dollars and a little change would travel in muscatel.

"Muscatel," I told Marty.

He shrugged and put down a full bottle, and a tumbler. Then he went back and tossed the two blondes out onto the curb.

I got started on a second bottle, and I remembered I was still lugging around the contacts of the Bradley girl and Martins. I got them out and tore them into little pieces, too small to get a grip. Then I flipped it into the air and it came down on my head and fluttering along the wet bar like confetti.

"I didn't expect you'd turn out like this, Mr. O'Meara," Marty said. He sounded kind of sad.

"I didn't either," I told him. "Cheer up. Let's call it a surprise party, and break out another jug of muscatel."

It was taking good hold, and the third bottle I was trying to see if I could get the last drop into a full glass when somebody was behind us, jogging my elbow.

"Square your hat, button your pea-jacket and shove off," I told him. "I'm commissioning a new vessel."

"Eddie, Eddie, Eddie," he was saying. "What you doing to yourself?"

When I got him in my sights it was Lazy. Laszlo Gorgey. My partner.

"Got to be somebody for the wolves," I said. "Might as well be Laszlo Gorgey. That was a wonderful montage, Lazy. Only I montaged it better. I montaged it into five trillion pieces. Go on back to the office and count the pieces. I remembered I got a date with a grape."

"I been by the office," he said. "But I went first by Uncle Mike Kalapos' house, out Encino. We got a release for the film, Irishman. We also got thirty thousand dollars."

"You'd think we were still in business," I said. "You'd think we sold a picture."

"For thirty thousand, we sold it," he said. "I told you I had an angle."

"I busted your angle," I reminded him. "I busted it good." He laughed, like the rundown on a soundtrack.

"The window-stuffing, you busted," he said. "The sales talk. I promise a montage to Danny Landa, so he gets into bed with his wife, for your camera. But that's not what I promise Uncle Mike Kalapos. I promise him a straight picture. No montage. No retouch. No fooling. I give him the negative. He gives us the release. Also the money."

"The other negative," I said. "The protection plate. But if that's all you were after—a straight shot of Landa in bed—why did you fool around with the montage? Why worry about that?"

"Business might not always be so good," he said. "There's no hurt to keep in practice. Also I promise Landa a montage, and I keep promises when Irishmen don't walk over them with big feet." He stopped a minute.

"Wait," I said. "Why didn't you . . ."

"Why not tell you?" he cut in. "My own partner? Irishman, you're a wonderful camera but you're a lousy actor."

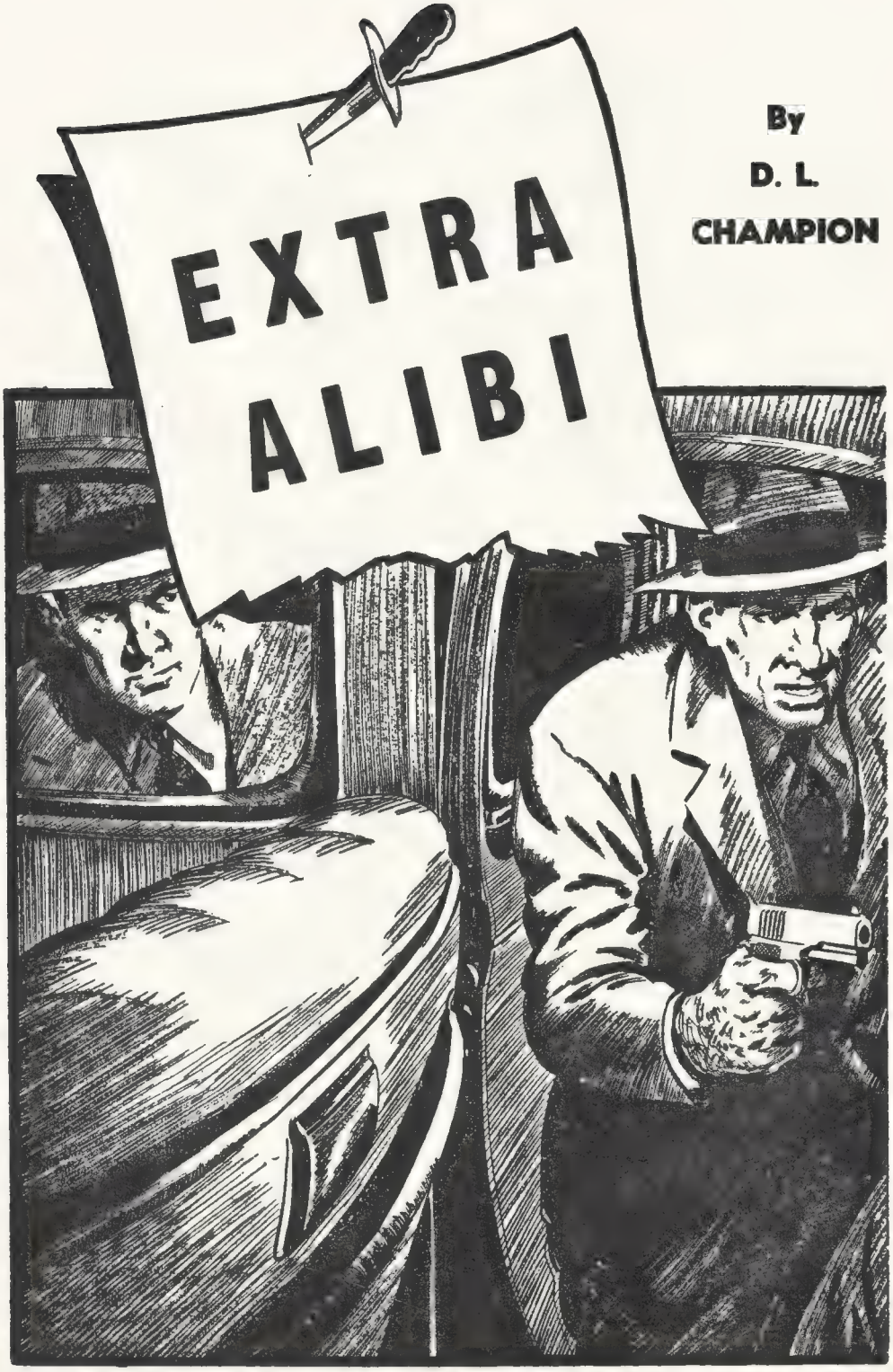
"Somebody for the wolves," I said, when I got my breath. "So Uncle Mike bounces Landa out into the street."

"One for the wolves," Lazy said. "Now wash the face. Some school teacher keeps calling up are you sober yet."

I opened the window and stuck my head out into the Hollywood air. It smelled good. And downstairs Rocco and Sibelius were getting close enough together on the keyboard. It almost sounded like music.

# EXTRA ALIBI

By D. L. CHAMPION



**Beamish was an unusual specimen of the genus private eye. "Set a crook to catch a crook," said he—and he was certainly the man for the job.**

MR. BEAMISH sat at his chipped and ink-stained desk, a straightened-out wire paper clip in one hand, a padlock in the other. His head was cocked, birdlike to one side of his scrawny neck and his bright blue eyes glittered behind his spectacles.

He inserted the wire of the paper clip into the lock. He maneuvered it delicately. Nothing happened. Mr. Beamish swore mildly under his breath and went to work on the closed padlock with concentration. He had been working for three full minutes without success.

If the problem had merely been that of opening the padlock, it would have

*Beamish's eyes blinked open at the menacing muzzle of the gun.*

been simple enough. The key lay on the right side of Mr. Beamish's desk. What Mr. Beamish was doing came under the heading of keeping his hand in.

A tiny click sounded suddenly and the padlock sprang open. Mr. Beamish smiled broadly. He opened a desk drawer and tossed the vanquished lock within. As he did so his gaze fell upon a handful of scattered business cards at the bottom of the drawer.

Mr. Beamish picked up a card and looked at it. He was inordinately proud of these cards. They proclaimed to whomever might receive one that Mr. Beamish was a solid citizen, that Mr. Beamish could hold up his balding head, that Mr. Beamish was an asset to the community at large.

The card which he regarded so smugly was an oblong of white which bore the name *Baxter Beamish* in bold black engraving. Beneath the name, in rather finer type, the card confided that Mr. Beamish was prepared to engage in all types of private investigations. Then, written in large script at the bottom, was the somewhat startling maxim: *Set a crook to catch a crook.*

Mr. Beamish smiled happily. He replaced the card in the desk drawer and transferred a cigar from his vest pocket to his mouth. He lighted it and leaned back in his chair, adopting a pose which he associated with top level executives.

He was a little man, with sparse hair and prominent red ears. His age was indeterminate but it was certain that his fiftieth birthday had already been celebrated. The major portion of his adult years had been insular in an almost literal sense. Mr. Beamish had spent them in jail.

He was a meek man; none of his peccadilloes had been crimes of violence. But Mr. Beamish was more adept than most at locating and appropriating an easy dollar. His methods were as ingenious as they were illegal. On occasion law enforcement officers had expressed admiration for Mr. Beamish's skillful chicanery. This, however, had not precluded his arrest.

Recently, however, Mr. Beamish had turned over a new leaf. It was a bright, spotless page wherein he hoped to write of the future in golden, honorable words.

Two years ago, a detective, whom he knew casually, had asked Mr. Beamish for some counsel regarding the probable conduct of an underworld character. Mr. Beamish's diagnosis had proved so irrefutably correct that the underworld character was, at this moment, marking numbers off the garish calendar which was the only bright spot in his prison cell.

It was then that Mr. Beamish decided that there might well be an honest dollar to be picked up in the field of private investigating. He had rented a small office, stocked it with second hand furniture and in some devious manner obtained a license.

He was not, it is true, in a class with the Pinkertons. His income was not that of J. Edgar Hoover. Millionaires involved in murder cases and willing to pay fortunes to become *un*involved were not among his clients.

But he had been retained in a half dozen divorce cases. He had guarded wedding presents twice. And once he had tracked down and handed over to Justice a delinquent bookkeeper.

He lived simply and these minor assignments supported him adequately.

MR. BEAMISH stood up and walked to the window. He squinted at the bright sunlight which slid over the dusty sill. It was with a sense of well-being that he looked down into the street.

Railtown was busy and purposeful this morning. Citizens moved briskly

and industriously along her streets. Trolleys clanged and shining new cars purred in the roadway. Mr. Beamish blinked and peered over the sill.

Two stories below him he caught sight of Detective-sergeant Aloysius Sweeney. Sweeny was a vast man with a red round face and tremendous girth. His mind was reputed to be the keenest on the local police force. However, he was possessed of a weakness which had bogged down his career at its present point.

Sweeney lavished all the affection he was capable of upon whiskey. He drank steadily and often. He held it well enough but toward midnight his faculties became fuddled; there was a slur to his sibilants when he spoke.

Mr. Beamish watched him disappear around the corner and shook his head not entirely without smugness. Since Mr. Beamish had renounced vice he felt superior to those who still clung to it. He sighed and returned to his desk.

He sat down, plopped a piece of gum into his mouth and reached for the morning paper. The front page was evenly divided between an exceedingly social wedding at the country club and the latest diplomatic maneuver of the Union of Socialist and Soviet Republics. Mr. Beamish turned the pages impatiently. If there were any news of local crime he knew it would be buried in the back of the paper in company with the classified advertising.

There were times when Mr. Beamish believed that the Railtown *Morning Sentinel* was not quite as vigilant as its name implied. He was right; but there were sound political reasons for this fact.

While it was true that Railtown possessed as many churches as any other community, the town was also host to a dozen first-class gambling joints along with several lesser hells. It possessed some score of clip joints where the customers were regaled with raw whiskey and even rawer floor shows. It boasted, if that's the right word, three burlesque houses in which the costuming bill didn't run over four dollars a week.

Moreover, there was a row of yellow brick houses over on Twelfth Street, the addresses of which were mentioned only in whispers and usually to taxi drivers.

Railtown, in short, was wide open.

Mr. Beamish leafed through the sporting page, passed the unappetizing recipe for baked lamb shanks, skipped through finance and ultimately, on page twenty-four, he was rewarded. He had found a burglary, a holdup and a murder.

His reaction was one of vague disappointment when he realized that he had never known of one Herbert Clineman, the murder victim. Or even heard of him.

Clineman, it appeared, had been an accountant. He had been found in his coupe with the steering wheel in his hands and a bullet in his brain. The item concluded with the information that Clineman had, among other duties, audited the books of Samuel Farrow. The police had learned of a quarrel between the two men and were at this moment seeking Mr. Farrow.

Mr. Bamish put down the paper. There was no opportunity to practice his profession here. Farrow was the toughest man in town. Farrow was the impresario behind the clip joints, the gambling houses and, it was murmured, also drew a discreet dividend from the row of yellow bricks on Twelfth Street.

He was a power in the town, politically and financially. He was a dangerous man to quarrel with. Herbert Clineman should have known better.

Mr. Beamish sighed and dropped the *Sentinel* in the waste basket. He opened the desk drawer and took the padlock out again. He snapped it shut and picked up the straightened paper clip. He went to work endeavoring to better

his former time. He was so engaged when the office door opened, then slammed shut again.

A girl stood before him. She was a young girl, save for her eyes. She was wearing a green suit, well cut and of expensive material. She was a tall girl and her hair was black as the raven's wing. A diamond pin glittered on the swell of her breast.

The rouge on her lips was smeared. Her face was white and her eyes haggard. She said abruptly and hoarsely: "I want to see Mr. Beamish."

Mr. Beamish put down the padlock. He said professionately: "What is the nature of your business?"

"I want to see Mr. Beamish," she repeated. "I got his name from the classified phone book. He was the nearest. So I came here. I got to see him right away."

She spoke quickly, nervously. The words seemed to tumble from her lips.

Mr. Beamish straightened in his chair, thrust out his puny chest and announced, not without a touch of melodrama: "*I* am Mr. Beamish."

His effect was dramatic, though not quite in the manner he had expected. The girl stared at him for a moment. The surprise in her face turned to disappointment. She said in disgust: "For heaven's sake! You won't do! I wanted a *bodyguard*."

For an instant Mr. Beamish was a picture of outraged pride. A hot word rose to his lips. He remembered that he was now engaged in commercial enterprise wherein a potential customer is always right. He checked his wrath and resorted to subtlety.

"Which," he asked, "is the most efficient law enforcement agency in the United States?"

The girl looked puzzled. She said hesitantly: "Why, the F.B.I., I suppose."

Exactly. And does the F.B.I. hire an army of trigger-happy gorillas whose I.Q. is something to bring a blush to the dirty cheek of a Kalikek?"

Now the girl was thoroughly bewildered. Mr. Beamish replied to his own rhetoric.

"No! The F.B.I. hires brains. A four-foot Hindu handles a ten ton elephant. Moral superiority. Brains. As a matter of cold hard fact," he added untruthfully, "bodyguarding is my specialty."

The girl lit a cigarette with fingers that trembled. She said: "I hardly know what I'm doing. I'm scared to death. You see, they just tried to blow me up."

Mr. Beamish blinked. "Blow you up?"

She nodded. She leaned forward in her chair. Speech came from her lips in a nervous stream.

"I'm Gladys Benham. I'm staying at the Regal Hotel. It's a couple of blocks from here. My car was parked outside the building when I came down this morning. I noticed that someone had side-swiped my fender during the night. I went back in the hotel and called the garage. They sent a man on a motorcycle to pick up the car. When he got in and stepped on the starter the car blew up."

Mr. Beamish blinked again. "And the garage man?"

She made a gesture of finality. "Dead."

"And the police?"

"I've just left them. They think it's all a mistake."

"That," said Mr. Beamish, "will be most reassuring to the soul of the garage man. What kind of a mistake?"

"They think that whoever planted the bomb, planted it in the wrong car. That he was trying to kill someone else. Because, they say, no one would want to kill me."

Mr. Beamish looked thoughtful. "What makes them so sure of that?"

Gladys Benham lit one cigarette from

the butt of another. "Because I'm a stranger in town. No one knows me. No one could possibly have anything against me. The police make it sound reasonable. But I'm still scared."

MR. BEAMISH leaned back in his chair. "Tell me about yourself. What are you doing in town?"

"I came to visit my uncle. Hartley Mannering. You know him?"

Mr. Beamish nodded. The nod did not mean that Hartley Mannering and himself were social cronies. It indicated, rather, that he was quite aware that Mannering was Railtown's wealthiest citizen, that he was a pillar of the church and the largest stockholder in two banks.

"If you are visiting Mannering," said Mr. Beamish, "why are you staying at a hotel instead of at his house?"

Two streams of smoke issued from Gladys Benham's nostrils. She said: "My uncle is against vice."

"I am aware of that," said Mr. Beamish, "but why aren't you staying with him?"

"I was. When I first arrived. I have money of my own. I'd heard that this town was wide open and I wanted to investigate. So I visited my uncle. He didn't approve of some of my investigations. We quarrelled."

Mr. Beamish lifted his eyebrows. He said: "And?"

"Naturally, I told him to go to hell. I moved out of the house and took a room at the Regal."

Mr. Beamish nodded his bony head and his eyes glittered behind his glasses. If he were to cast a vote for the man of his acquaintance most likely to plant a bomb in an automobile he would mark his ballot without hesitation.

He said: "Do you know Sam Farrow?"

"You mean the racket guy who owns the joints? I certainly do not know him."

"Never seen him? Never spoken to him?"

She shook her head emphatically. "Not that I'm a snob but I'm not a moll, either."

She took another cigarette from her purse. Mr. Beamish watched her closely. It seemed reasonable to him that the police theory of a mistakenly planted bomb was sound. Nevertheless the girl was certainly scared. Her fingers trembled and her face was pale.

Of course, Mr. Beamish did not overlook the business angle involved. If he could attach himself to her as a bodyguard, there would certainly be a decent fee in it.

"Well," he said at last, "the police may be right. But there's no sense in taking chances. You shall hire me. Even if there is no physical danger a bodyguard is a good thing psychologically."

This time the idea didn't seem to strike her as absurdly as it had done at first. Nevertheless, there was a shade of doubt in her voice as she asked: "Do you carry a gun?"

Mr. Beamish emphatically did not carry a gun. He had managed with a fine degree of duplicity to obtain his private detective's license in spite of his former record. He had been flatly refused a pistol permit.

He said disdainfully: "I've never needed a gun. My weapons are a glib tongue, a wit swift as a serpent's tongue, and this." Here he took a glass vial from his pocket. It was filled with a smoky white fluid.

The girl peered curiously at the vial. "What is that?"

"A weapon of sorts. If I suspect an adversary has designs upon me I invite him to talk it over. I rather give the impression that I'll go along with him. Once we have repaired to either a saloon or milk bar, depending on the tastes of

my opponent, I contrive to drop a smidgen of this liquid into his glass."

"What does it do?"

"It induces sleep," said Mr. Beamish. "Sound restful sleep. Though I fear the victim hardly arises refreshed."

Gladys Benham's lips parted in a tremulous smile. The superficial hardness of her face relaxed. She covered her eyes with her hands and wept softly.

Mr. Beamish made a commiserating clucking sound with his tongue. He walked around his desk. He put a thin hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said. "I have a suggestion. You shall retain me. Then to doubly protect you, you shall call your uncle and apologize. He's probably heard about the explosion by now and will welcome you. You'll go back to his house and I shall go with you as a bodyguard. You'll be really safe enough there."

She looked up at him and smiled with her eyes. "You're a reassurring old guy," she said. "I like you. You're hired. Maybe I'm crazy but I sort of feel better when you're around."

Most people did. It was a gift Mr. Beamish possessed, a gift which in those dark days prior to his reform had cost many people dearly.

"Good," said Mr. Beamish. "Give me the key to your hotel and some money. I'll go over and get your things, pay your bill and check you out. You can lock yourself in here and phone your uncle in the meantime."

She nodded. "All right. But after you come back, you stick close to me. I'll feel you're really earning your money then."

"Why?"

"Because if they try to blow me up again they'll blow you up, too."

Mr. Beamish's laughter was hardly as hearty as a bowl of thick oatmeal on a January morning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Drunk to Death

MR. BEAMISH'S gait was jaunty as he strode the three blocks between his office and the Regal Hotel. His hat was cocked nattily on the side of his head and his blue eyes held a gleam engendered partly by amusement, partly by avarice.

Although Mr. Beamish's opinion of the mentality of the local police department was not as high as a moderately sized Alp, he was quite convinced that on this particular occasion, they were right.

Gladys Benham, in all probability, had no powerful enemies in Railtown. Certainly she wasn't trying to cut any of Farrow's rackets. She was a stranger and Mr. Beamish could see no motive for any local talent to wish her demise.

Therefore, reasoned Mr. Beamish, his client was in no danger. And if Mr. Beamish could keep her custom for $x$ number of days at twenty-five dollars a day, he would quite clearly finish up with $25x$ dollars.

He was whistling as he entered the hotel lobby.

He emerged from the elevator at the ninth floor, took the key from his pocket and wandered along a plush carpet until he arrived at 906. He unlocked the door and entered.

As he crossed the threshold and shut the door behind him, he realized that the room was not unoccupied. Seated in its single armchair, his back to the window was the bulky figure of Aloysius Sweeney.

Sergeant Sweeney's face seemed not as rubicund as usual and his eyes were closed. He looked like a tired fat man catching up on his sleep in the middle of the day. Moreover, he looked like a fat man who would snore loudly. However, he was not snoring.

Mr. Beamish moved closer. He stood in utter silence for a long moment, then realized that Aloysius Sweeney was not breathing, either.

Some of Mr. Beamish's jauntiness left him. He glanced sharply around the room. On a small table at the side of Sweeney's chair stood a bottle. It was half full and next to it was an empty glass.

Mr. Beamish picked up the bottle and held it to his nostrils. He sniffed warily. Now, Mr. Beamish was no connoisseur of poison; however, he was possessed of a vast and varied knowledge of whiskey. The label on this bottle attested to the fact that its contents had been prepared in an ancient, honorable Louisville still. But the biting odor that assailed Mr. Beamish's nostrils belied the label.

He put the bottle down, lighted a cigarette and sighed. He had no doubt that the whiskey had been adulterated. He had no doubt that the adulterant had been a powerful one. He had no doubt at all that Aloysius Sweeney had fulfilled the dire prediction of his associates. He had literally drunk himself to death.

Mr. Beamish sat down on the edge of the unmade bed and gave himself over to thought. The coppers had been wrong after all and so had Mr. Beamish. It seemed clear enough, at this point, that someone was going to a great deal of trouble to transfer Gladys Benham from this chaotic world to a more tranquil one.

Mr. Beamish brought up a sigh from the bottom of his sturdy cotton socks. Some of his customary calm deserted him. His brow was corrugated in deep, subjective thought.

He stood up, crossed the room to a writing desk and picked up the *Do Not Disturb* sign which lay on the blotter. He opened the door cautiously, ascertained that no one was in the hall outside. He left the room, closing the door behind him and hanging the sign on the knob.

He passed up the elevators and walked eight flights of stairs to the ground floor. He sidled unobtrusively through the hotel's secondary entrance. He walked rapidly back to his office and there was a lapin nervousness in his gait.

Gladys Benham smoked a cigarette and it seemed as if she had suddenly acquired some of the calm which Mr. Beamish had lost. She looked up as Mr. Beamish entered and smiled.

"Did you check me out?"

Mr. Beamish sat down. He removed his hat and mopped his balding pate with an elegant silk handkerchief, and shook his head.

"Why not?"

Mr. Beamish took a grip on himself. "It did not seem advisable," he said. "Listen."

He told her of Sergeant Sweeney's corpse, of the bottle of poisoned whiskey. When he had concluded the girl was frowning.

"There was no whiskey in the room when I left it."

"That's what I thought," said Mr. Beamish. "Now, get this. That bomb in your car was no error. Someone is trying to kill you. There are already two dead men to attest to that fact. Get out of town right away. Far out. Go to Iowa, China, Siam."

The girl blinked at him. Mr. Beamish continued: "I'm in trouble, too. There are certain coppers in this town who don't like me. I have a record. I put the Don't Disturb sign on the door to give us both time. Obviously, the killer won't attempt your life again until he's learned his last effort failed. We'll have all day for you to scram and for me to prepare evidence that I haven't been near the Regal Hotel for two weeks. Your uncle can get your baggage."

The girl exhaled two streams of smoke through an excellently modelled nose. She said, "No," with a firmness in marked contrast to her former anxiety.

Mr. Beamish appeared startled. "You don't realize the gravity—" he began.

"I do," said the girl. "I admit when I first came here I was panicky. But I've recovered. I've got a stubborn streak. Moreover, if it's so important that I die I could just as well be killed in Iowa as here."

"But—"

"I'm staying," she said evenly. "I've spoken to my uncle. I'm to go to his house to stay. I'll be safe there. In the meantime, we'll find out who this killer is and why he wants to kill me."

"*Who'll* find out?" asked Mr. Beamish quizzically.

"You will," she said. She added, not unreasonably: "You're a detective, aren't you?"

That fact had somehow slipped Mr. Beamish's mind. He had associated his profession with such minor matters as shadowing errant bookkeepers to the race tracks, obtaining divorce evidence and guarding anniversary silver. Corpses had never entered his purview.

"Naturally," said Gladys Benham, "the fee in a matter as serious as this would probably run to three or four thousand dollars."

Mr. Beamish stood up. After all, he was a professional man and he had been offered a fee. He squared his thin shoulders.

"Come on," he said. "We'll get a taxi."

It was not his customary means of transportation but now he was working with an expense account.

HARTLEY MANNERING'S mansion had been constructed in the days when Victoria Regina's ample posterior had rested firmly on the throne of England. The architect had followed the melancholy tradition of the era.

It was a gloomy structure of mansards, gables, wrought iron and brown stone. Behind it lay five green acres.

The creaking front door was opened by a slightly less creaking butler. He smiled frostily at the girl, frowned slightly at Mr. Beamish. He said: "Mr. Mannering is in the library."

Mr. Beamish followed his client along a dim and heavily carpeted corridor. At its end she opened a door and entered a vast, rectangular room. Mr. Beamish still followed.

The walls of the chamber were lined with dusty books. Heavy drapes at the window repulsed the sunlight. The furniture was upholstered in worn brown leather.

Two men were in the room. Hartley Mannering, thin, with beetling brows and a corvine nose, sat at a gleaming wide desk. At his side stood a bulky figure in the uniform of a police captain. The latter was engaged in removing his overcoat. Apparently, his arrival had barely preceded that of Mr. Beamish and Gladys Benham.

Mannering stretched a bony hand toward his niece. "Gladys," he said. "Are you all right? I was shocked when I heard about that bomb. You shall stay here, my dear girl. We'll forget our differences."

Mannering gestured toward the policeman. "This is Captain Wroth."

The policeman bowed. Gladys nodded and waved a languid hand in the direction of Mr. Beamish.

"This," she said, "is Mr. Beamish. My bodyguard."

Mr. Beamish smiled cordially. Mannering stared at him, then blinked. Mr. Beamish realized that perhaps he did not appear an impressive bodyguard; nevertheless Mannering's obvious incredulity

irked him tremendously, to say the least.

"Private investigator," he explained. "Understanding of criminal psychology. Lots of experience."

Captain Wroth laughed. "I know where you got it, too. As a matter of fact I sent you up once, myself."

Mannering blinked again and addressed himself to the policeman. "You mean this man's a crook?"

"He was," said Wroth. "Now he's gone straight. Gets a few divorce cases and stuff like that."

"Gladys," said Mannering. "Send this man away. You won't need a bodyguard here. If you do we'll find someone more fitted."

Mr. Beamish bristled. Before he could frame a reply, the girl said stubbornly: "I like him. I've hired him and he stays with me."

Her jaw was set and her eyes were hard. It was apparent that Gladys Benham had a mind of her own. To judge from Mannering's reluctant but swift concurrence, it was also apparent that he was aware of it.

"All right," he said. "We can discuss it later."

There was a moment's silence, then Wroth said deferentially: "Headquarters sent me, Mr. Mannering. To ask you more about the Farrow alibi for the Clineman killing."

Mr. Beamish's memory stirred. He recalled the news story he had read earlier that morning. Clineman was the dead accountant of Sam Farrow. It seemed queer that an affair on this level should interest the highborn Hartley Mannering.

"Oh, that," said Mannering. "Did you cancel the alarm you sent out for Farrow?"

"Why, yes," said Wroth. "The chief did that after you called. But he asked me to check with you."

Mannering coughed. "This is most embarrassing," he said. "And I must pledge you all to the utmost secrecy. I want no publicity, no scandal. However, I must do my duty as a Christian citizen."

Now, curiosity positively gnawed at Mr. Beamish. He helped himself to a cigar from the humidor on the desk and lighted it as he waited for Hartley Mannering to perform his Christian and civic duties.

"Naturally," said Mannering, "Farrow means nothing to me. As a matter of fact it would be a good thing if he *was* put away. He's a blight on our city. Nevertheless, I cannot see a man falsely charged with murder. You agree, captain?"

The captain, in some bewilderment, agreed.

"It is my son, Ronald," said Mannering. "He has an unfortunate weakness for gambling. He can't keep away from a dice table. In the past he has lost a considerable amount in Farrow's gambling spots. This last time he got in over his head. He lost more than he could pay. Finally, he was forced to come to me."

Captain Wroth nodded politely, still not understanding what all this had to do with the murder of Herbert Clineman. Mr. Beamish drew luxuriously upon his black cigar.

"Naturally," went on Mannering, "I was furious. I undertook to pay his debts to Farrow provided he would never gamble again. To insure his promise would be kept, I paid Farrow personally and warned him never to let Ronald enter his gambling premises again. Is that clear?"

"You mean—?" began the policeman doubtfully.

"I mean," said Mannering, "that at midnight last night I was in Samuel Farrow's office, settling my son's debts. According to the paper, this Clineman was killed between midnight and one o'clock.

Farrow was with me during that period."

Gladys Benham blew cigarette smoke toward the beamed ceiling. Wroth registered disappointment. Mannering seemed mildly embarrassed.

"I awoke early this morning," he went on. "Couldn't sleep. I went out to get the morning paper. I saw the murder story there and called Headquarters at once."

Wroth shrugged. He seemed unhappy. "Naturally," he said, "Farrow's alibi supported by you is valid. We learned that Farrow had been seeing something of Clineman's wife. We knew they'd quarrelled about it. That made Farrow a natural suspect, but if you were with him—"

His voice trailed off dispiritedly. He murmured a polite good-bye and took a rather frustrated departure.

Mannering turned his eyes upon the girl.

"As for you," he said, "you'd better go away. Go to Europe or somewhere. I'm positive the attempt on your life was a mistake. But it would be foolish to take chances. Let me send you away. Now."

Gladys Benham stood up. "No," she said. "This is beginning to fascinate me. If someone wants to kill me I want to find out why." She flashed a smile at Mr. Beamish. "Don't we?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Beamish stoutly.

"I suppose," said Gladys, "I'll occupy the same rooms as before?"

"Of course. Perhaps you'd better rest. You must be under a strain. We'll discuss your trip later."

Gladys walked toward the door, signaling Mr. Beamish to follow her.

EVENTUALLY, Mr. Beamish found himself in an elegantly furnished two room suite at the rear of the ancient house. Wide windows gave out on to a wide green lawn. Sunshine slid across the sill.

Mr. Beamish sighed and sat down. His devious brain was at work. He was wondering if there were any connection between the death of Herbert Clineman and the attempt to put Gladys Benham out of the way. A vague theory was forming in his mind, when the girl said suddenly: "Well, what now?" What are you going to do about that dead copper in my hotel room?"

Mr. Beamish shuddered. He had forgotten about Aloysius Sweeney. It was a problem which he would, sooner or later, have to face.

"Let Sweeney stay there," he said. "I need time to think. Tell me, did you know this murdered guy, Clineman?"

The girl shook her head. "Never heard of him until just now. Why?"

"You didn't witness his murder?" persisted Mr. Beamish. "You're sure you don't possess any information which would be dangerous to the guy who killed Clineman?"

"Of course not. How could I?"

Mr. Beamish sighed again. He seemed to be getting nowhere at a great pace. "All right," he said, "tell me, just where were you last night between midnight and one o'clock?"

"Drunk."

"But where?"

"I don't know. Some roadhouse. About an hour's drive out of town. I don't remember too well."

"If you drove there, you ought to know where you were."

"I didn't drive. Harry did."

"Who's Harry?"

"That's the guy who picked me up at the Little Club."

Mr. Beamish, whose cigar was smoked down to its last millimeter, reluctantly put it out. He said: "Tell me about this Harry. What's his last name?"

"Johnson. I hit a lot of the spots last

night. Around midnight I was kind of tight. Alone at the bar of the Little Club. This guy offers to buy me a drink. I accept. Then we drove out to this roadhouse. Didn't get back until dawn."

Mr. Beamish shook his head. If there were any clues here, they were most certainly not visible to his naked eye. He scratched his mangy head. He wrinkled his brow in thought.

The girl said: "I'm dead tired after last night and this morning. I'm going in the other room to lie down for a while. You start to work. Looking for clues or whatever it is detectives do."

Mr. Beamish grunted. He hadn't the faintest idea what detectives did. And at that particular moment he would have given a very pretty penny to know.

For a long time after Gladys had gone to the other room, Mr. Beamish sat staring out on to the sun-swept lawn. His brain cells functioned nervously. The sun sank to the west and the shadows grew deeper, and still Mr. Beamish plumbed the depths of an empty mind.

Shortly before six o'clock, there was a faint tapping at the door and it opened. A tall man of about thirty came into the room. His hair was dark and his face thin. His nose was a replica of that of Hartley Mannering. This, then, decided Mr. Beamish, was the crap-shooting branch of the family.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Ronald Mannering. I hear Glad has come back. Though I'd drop in to say hello."

"She's resting," said Mr. Beamish. "Had a hard day. Almost got killed."

Ronald clucked commiseratingly, said, "I heard about it," and sat down.

Mr. Beamish looked at him and a sound idea entered his brain. Ronald was a sucker at craps. Mr. Beamish's right hand dropped to his coat pocket. His fingers closed around a pair of dice. Mr. Beamish withdrew them and tossed them idly on the table in front of him.

He said: "I'm your cousin's bodyguard, you know. Gets awfully dull sitting here." He picked the dice up and rolled them again. "Want to shoot a quarter?"

Ronald did not appear enthusiastic. Mr. Beamish, however, considered it a violation of his personal code to permit a sucker to escape. If Sam Farrow had got Ronald for several thousand, there was no reason why he shouldn't lose a few bucks to Mr. Beamish.

"Come on," he said. "Two bits won't hurt you. Here, you can roll first."

Ronald picked up the dice with the air of a man being amiable, rather than that of one possessed of a gambling feyer. He tossed the cubes along the table.

Mr. Beamish studied the upturned numbers on the dice.

"Craps," he said pleasantly. "Shoot again."

He picked up one of the quarters. Ronald fished in his pocket and produced another coin. He shot again.

"Boxcars," announced Mr. Beamish. "Bet you don't make it."

"You mean," said Ronald, "you'll bet me another quarter I don't make the ten."

Mr. Beamish blinked. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. Then he nodded. Ronald said, "All right," and produced a third quarter. Mr. Beamish covered it absently.

Two rolls later Ronald made his ten. Mr. Beamish pushed the stakes across to his adversary and became suddenly tired of the game.

"That's enough," he said. "Can't afford to lose any more."

"O. K.," said Ronald, getting up. "I'll see you at dinner, I suppose."

He went out of the room. Mr. Beamish's quizzical eye followed his exit. There was an excited beat in the pulse of Mr. Beamish. There was gleam in

his pupil. Mr. Beamish now had a clue.

Gladys Benham slept soundly. She did not get up for dinner and Mr. Beamish's supper was brought to him on a silver tray. Despite the fact that the dishes were far choicer than those served in his customary haunts, Mr. Beamish ate moodily.

At eight o'clock the tray was removed. At ten Mr. Beamish was summoned to the library. His client still slept.

Hartley Mannering sat behind his great desk. Mr. Beamish noted that there was an oblong of green paper on the blotter before him. He said, "Good evening," deferentially as he approached the desk.

Mannering nodded. "Beamish," he said, "it's time we stopped this bodyguard nonsense. It's obvious that you're taking advantage of an innocent girl."

That particular characterization of Gladys Benham was certainly open to argument, but Mr. Beamish said nothing.

"It's equally obvious," said Mannering, "that you couldn't protect her against a determined newsboy. Now, I'll give you this check for five hundred dollars on condition you walk right out that front door and never come back again."

He held the green paper out to Mr. Beamish. Mr. Beamish took it and folded it slowly into four pieces.

He said: "If anything should happen to Miss Benham, it would be extremely bad for my business."

Mannering snorted. "Nothing will happen to her. As a matter of fact I'm going to ship her out of town tonight. As soon as she wakes up. There is no sense in taking chances."

"But," Mr. Beamish pointed out, "she's already refused to go."

"I can talk her into it. Now, I take it, you accept my proposition?"

Mr. Beamish nodded. He stowed the check away in his vest pocket, walked out of the room, down the long, heavily carpeted corridor and went out the creaking front door.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Wit for a Weapon

HE STOOD outside on the dark lawn for a long time. Crickets sang and an owl hooted but Mr. Beamish did not hear them. He was rapt in thought.

At last he moved. He walked slowly around to the rear of the melancholy house. He had made an agreement not to enter the front door again; there was nothing in the pact regarding a back window.

The window of Gladys Benham's bedroom was open. Mr. Beamish approached it on light feet. The night was dark and moonless. His pulse was high. There was an exitement in his veins. His eyes were bright and there was a faint tremble in his knees. He drew a deep breath and thrust his head over the window sill. The slight sound of the girl's breathing reached his ears. He licked his dry lips.

"Psst!!" said Mr. Beamish.

It was almost three o'clock of the morning. The night was still dark and the yellow beam of the street lamps were pale and ineffectual. Mr. Beamish stood quiet and motionless, leaning against the iron fence which encircled the Mannering estate.

His ancient legs ached. Sleep assailed his eyes. There was a weariness upon him. For more than three hours he had kept this dogged vigil, denying himself even the solace of a cigarette.

He yawned, knuckled the drowsiness from his tired eyes. Then he saw the car. It came around the far corner on silent tires. It moved slowly and its lights

were dimmed. It came to a halt directly before the Mannering gate.

After a moment, two men disembarked. They shut the door quietly behind them and entered the Mannering property. By straining his eyes against the darkness, Mr. Beamish saw them move across the lawn, around to the rear of the house.

Mr. Beamish was aware of a heady sensation of triumph. But he knew that the time for taking a gracious bow had not yet arrived. There was still work to be done, dangerous work, with his wit as his only weapon.

He left the shadow of the fence and moved along the street toward the parked car. It was a large limousine painted a grave black. It was new and shining. Under its hood was an engine of power.

Mr. Beamish turned the door handle. It was not locked. He entered the rear seat and sat down. He uttered a luxurious sigh as he leaned back against the yielding upholstery. He closed his eyes to rest them for a moment. And in another instant he was dozing gently.

A rough hand jerked him to wakefulness. An even rougher voice said: "Who the hell are you?"

Mr. Beamish's eyes blinked open. The first thing he beheld was a hard, saturnine face with a purple scar running from its forehead to its chin. He turned his head away only to see a second face almost as unpleasant as the first.

Mr. Beamish said: "My name is Baxter Beamish. Take me to Sam Farrow at once."

The man with the scar said to his companion: "Dick, this mug wants to see Sam."

Dick pushed his head through the car window and said: "What do you want to see him for?"

"I want to make a deal with him," said Mr. Beamish.

He paused, added: "About the girl."

Scarface said to no one in particular: "He knows something." He seized Mr. Beamish's shoulder in a heavy grip. "What do you know?"

"Obviously," said Mr. Beamish, "I know where the girl is."

The thugs exchanged glances. Dick dropped his right hand to his coat pocket and brought it to view again holding an automatic. He aimed its muzzle in the general direction of Mr. Beamish's pounding heart. He said: "Where is she?"

Mr. Beamish made a tremendous effort to keep his voice casual. He almost succeeded. "I'll tell that to Farrow. After he's met my terms."

The man with the scar screwed up his brow. It was evident that he was thinking. It was also evident that thinking was not a process he achieved easily. He said at last: "I guess we better take him to see Sam. If he really knows where the dame is, Sam'll want to see him."

Dick's automatic prodded Mr. Beamish's chest. "I can make him talk."

"But," said Scarface, "if he doesn't talk, you'll have to knock him off and then he can't tell us where the dame is. And Sam'll be mad."

The idea of Sam Farrow's wrath seemed to convince Dick. He nodded his head. He said: "All right. You drive. I'll take care of him on the way."

Scarface climbed in behind the wheel and started off. Dick's idea of taking care of Mr. Beamish was to keep his automatic carefully pointed toward the Beamish vest, to watch him with unblinking eyes.

Sam Farrow's headquarters were situated on the outer edge of the town, in a staid ten-story apartment house. Farrow's offices were in a luxuriously furnished penthouse on the building's roof.

Mr. Beamish was conducted from the car to the elevator. Finally, he was seated

in a vast anteroom, with Dick at his side while Scarface went in to inform the boss of the visitor.

The office hours of Sam Farrow were not the office hours of the First National Bank. Farrow went over his day's accounts at midnight and worked steadily until dawn. He was in the middle of the day's business when informed of Mr. Beamish's presence.

MR. BEAMISH was ushered into Farrow's private office. Scarface slammed the door behind him and from now on in, Mr. Beamish thought with some trepidation, he was on his own.

Farrow sat behind a wide desk. A pile of banknotes was at his right hand, a thick ledger at his left. Farrow was a big man. He had two chins and bland blue eyes. His hands were pudgy and at some stage of his career his nose had been broken in two places.

He waved Mr. Beamish to a chair and said not without cordiality: "The boys tell me you want to talk to me."

Mr. Beamish nodded, smiled and sat down. His shrewd eyes hastily cased the room. There were a pair of steel filing cabinets in one corner, a water cooler and a small, shiny bar which held a gleaming array of bottles.

The art work on the walls indicated that Samuel Farrow was not exactly a family man. The pictures for the most part were of girls, girls who were by no means wearing full length bombazine dresses. On the contrary. At the bottom of most of these photographs were inked inscriptions attesting to the fact that the signer was something more than a casual friend of Mr. Farrow's.

Farrow opened a cigar box and pushed it across the desk to Mr. Beamish. Mr. Beamish accepted it and said abruptly: "I understand you're looking for Gladys Benham."

Farrow's blue eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Do you?" he said softly. "And what if I am?"

Mr. Beamish came to the point like a setter. "I know where she is."

"Where?"

Mr. Beamish looked reproachful. "You know better than that," he said. "Before I can answer your question we must talk business."

A faint smile flickered on Farrow's lips. "Ah, of course, business. Just what is the extent of the business you have in mind?"

"Ten thousand dollars," said Mr. Beamish.

"That's a lot of money for such unimportant information."

Mr. Beamish lifted his eyebrows to indicate that he did not believe the information was unimportant. He said: "I know it's a lot of money. I don't want to rush you. Think it over." His roving eye fell upon the bar. "While you meditate, would it be possible for us to dampen our throats?"

Farrow chuckled. "Why not?" he said. He got up and went to the bar. He carried a bottle, two glasses and a siphon to the desk. He poured two liberal drinks.

Mr. Beamish picked up his glass. As he did so his gaze lingered on what was probably the least subtle pose of all the photographs on the wall. Mr. Beamish blinked and cackled lewdly.

"That's some kid," he said. "If I was twenty years younger—"

Farrow half turned in his swivel chair to observe which sample of womanhood had evoked this tribute. As he did so Mr. Beamish's hand moved with the speed of sound.

He snatched the vial from his vest pocket, stretched his hand over the top of Farrow's glass and spilled a drop of the colorless liquid into the whiskey. When Farrow turned back to him, the

vial once again rested in Mr. Beamish's hound's tooth vest.

"Yeah," said Farrow. "That's Muriel. She's a pretty hot kid. Well, good luck."

He emptied his glass. He said: "I'm willing to pay a reasonable fee for your information but ten grand is too high. Suppose, I offer you—"

What he was about to offer Mr. Beamish was never precisely established. For at that moment, Farrow's jaw sagged and his eyelids fell gently over his pupils.

His two chins quivered for an instant, then he slumped in his chair and was silent.

Mr. Beamish sprang to silent action. First, he hastily examined the ledger on the desk. Then unearthing several other account books from the desk drawer he scrutinized them swiftly. After some thirty minutes of frenzied activity, he decided he had found what he had come to find.

He straightened up, helped himself to a handful of cigars from the open box on the desk. As he did so he noted a silver framed photograph of Sam Farrow, clad in white ducks, standing beside what appeared to be a huge tarpon.

Mr. Beamish smiled happily. Everything seemed to be breaking perfectly. He put the photograph in his pocket. He cast a farewell glance in the direction of the sleeping Farrow, and walked boldly out the door.

He met Scarface in the hall. He said curtly: "Mr. Farrow and I have made satisfactory arrangements. He is working on the details now. He told me to tell you he is to remain undisturbed until he sends for you."

Scarface accepted this baldfaced lie as gospel truth. He said, "O. K.," and Mr. Beamish jauntily pressed the elevator bell.

Forty-five minutes later, he tapped softly on the door of a second floor room in a third rate hotel on Granton Street. The door opened cautiously and he was admitted by Gladys Benham. He went into the room and sat beside her on the bed.

"Well," she said, "how did you do?"

"Elegantly," said Mr. Beamish. He thrust his hand in his pocket and produced the picture of Sam Farrow and the tarpon. He held it out to the girl. He said: "Have you ever seen this man before?"

"Sure, I have. That's Harry Johnson. The guy that picked me up last night."

Mr. Beamish's smile was the smile of a conqueror. "Tomorrow," he said, "I am going to raise my fees."

Gladys Benham looked at him. "You mean you've got this thing all figured out?"

"All figured out," said Mr. Beamish.

"No kidding? You must be pretty good."

"I am a genius," said Mr. Beamish modestly.

THE FIRST gray of the dawn streaked across the sky as Captain Wroth, aroused by an insistent ringing of his doorbell, shuffled along the hall of his apartment and opened the door. He stood for a moment blinking at his two visitors.

Suddenly he grinned broadly, said with exaggerated cordiality: "Come in, come in. Make yourselves comfortable while I get my pants on, then I'll be pleased to put you both under arrest."

Gladys Benham looked at Mr. Beamish, then back at Wroth. She said nervously: "Arrest?"

"Arrest," said Wroth grimly. "Sergeant Sweeney was found dead in your hotel room early this morning. Beamish's fingerprints were on the whiskey bottle in the room."

"Ah, that," said Mr. Beamish with a lordly air. "I shall clear that up along with all the rest of it."

"You can clear it up in your cell," said Wroth.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Beamish. "I shall clear it up in the home of Hartley Mannering."

Wroth stared at him. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"I am prepared," said Mr. Beamish pompously, "to tell you who killed Herbert Clineman, who killed Sergeant Sweeney and who made two attempts upon the life of my client. However, I insist on doing all this in the Mannering house."

Wroth looked at him thoughtfully. "You sound pretty sure of yourself."

"I exude confidence," said Mr. Beamish. "And, by the way, you'd better call Headquarters and have a copper who can take shorthand meet us at Mannering's house."

"Why?"

"I expect a confession."

"From whom?"

"All in good time," said Mr. Beamish. "All in good time. Will you kindly put on your trousers?"

"All right," said Wroth. "But you'd better deliver. Otherwise, I'll throw every volume of the penal code at you. Federal, State and local."

Mr. Beamish lit a cigarette and blew the smoke at the ceiling. "Time," he remarked, "is a-wasting."

Hartley Mannering was even more amazed at his early morning callers than Captain Wroth had been. He came into the library in a brocaded dressing gown, stared first at his niece, then at Mr. Beamish, finally at Wroth and Patrolman Hennessey whom Wroth had summoned from Headquarters. He said in a tight nervous voice: "What's this all about?"

Wroth waved a hand toward Mr. Beamish. "This man believes he's discovered something, sir."

Mannering sat down. "My God," he said, "and do I have to become acquainted with his discoveries at this hour of the morning? What is the meaning of this?"

Wroth shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He looked as if he regretted the whole idea of coming over to Mannering's house.

"All right," he said sharply, "start talking, Beamish. What are these important findings of yours? Better be quick about it."

Mr. Beamish crossed his legs and thrust his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest. "First," he said, "I would like to mention that I rolled dice with Ronald Mannering yesterday. His point was a ten and he took even money that he wouldn't make it."

Wroth stared at him. "So what?" he growled.

"So," said Mr. Beamish, "he doesn't know anything about crap. An amateur knows that it's two to one against a ten. Ronald didn't that or anything else about dice."

There was a moment's silence. "Therefore," said Mr. Beamish, "it simply is not true that Mr. Mannering saw Farrow to settle his son's dice debts. Ronald doesn't know the first thing about dice. And if that isn't true, it's reasonable to assume that none of Mannering's story is true."

"Why should Mr. Mannering lie?" asked Wroth.

"When I first asked myself that," said Mr. Beamish, "the obvious answer seemed to be that he did not want Sam Farrow to be picked up by the city police."

"Why the devil should I care about Farrow?" snapped Mannering. "It was only my civic duty—"

Mr. Beamish interrupted. "If Farrow was picked up, even if he were innocent, it was quite likely that his affairs would be investigated."

"Why would Mr. Mannering care about that?" said Wroth.

Mr. Beamish fixed Hartley Mannering with his bland blue eyes. "It would do him incalculable harm morally and commercially," he said.

Gladys Benham lighted a cigarette. There was humor in her gaze as she looked at her uncle. Mannering drew in his breath, and looked around.

Wroth said: "What the devil are you talking about? And who are you trying to incriminate?"

Mr. Beamish looked at him in mild reproof. "I am saying in my roundabout way that Hartley Mannering killed Herbert Clineman."

The silence was such that a falling feather would have thudded on the parquet floor.

"I repeat," said Mr. Beamish, "that Hartley killed Clineman. He knew of the quarrel with Farrow about Clineman's wife. He knew Farrow would be picked up as soon as Clineman's body was found. But it was essential to him that Farrow was not invesigated. He tried all night to get in touch with Farrow. But couldn't. He had to wait until six when the papers were out, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to explain how he knew of the murder. Then at six this morning he decided to give Farrow a sound alibi."

"If he couldn't find Farrow," said Wroth, "how did he know Farrow already didn't have an alibi he was prepared to use?"

"As a matter of fact Farrow *did* have one," said Mr. Beamish. "But Mannering doubtless figured that any alibi Farrow had legitimately would be furnished by the low characters with whom he associates, whereas an alibi from solid citizen Mannering would be immediately effective in calling off the coppers."

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MANNERING'S face was taut. Wroth's brow was perplexed. Gladys Benham seemed to be enjoying herself. Wroth said: "Do you mind telling this in words of one syllable?"

"All right," said Mr. Beamish. "Get this: Mannering owns half of Farrow's rackets. Clineman, in his capacity as auditor, learned this. He came to Mannering with a blackmail proposition and Mannering killed him. Now, if Farrow is picked up for the killing, his affairs will be investigated and Mannering's connection with the rackets will be exposed."

"Sure," said Gladys Benham, "that's why he tried to have me knocked off, too."

Wroth said: "How does Miss Benham get into this?"

"Miss Benham," said Mr. Beamish, "was Farrow's *legitimate* alibi. He picked her up just before the Clineman murder. Following the practice of a lot of guys who pick up girls, he gave her a phoney name. They went out and got drunk together. The girl is Farrow's honest alibi."

Wroth screwed up his brow. He said: "Go on."

"My God," said Mr. Beamish, "don't you get it yet? Mannering found out that Farrow had been out with his niece *after* he'd given Farrow the phoney alibi. Now, what happens if the girl sees Farrow's picture in the paper or sees him somewhere? What happens when she finds out the guy who told her his name was Harry Johnson turns out to be Farrow."

"I'll bite," said Wroth. "What happens?"

"Hell breaks loose," said Mr. Beamish. "The girl knows she was with Farrow, yet her uncle has sworn that *he* was. So she talks. So they investigate and find out that Hartley Mannering lied. They

investigate further and find out what Clineman found out, what I found out myself last night at Farrow's office—that Mannering is a partner in the vice of this town."

At this point Captain Wroth looked rather less puzzled. "So then they tried to knock off the girl?"

"Right," said Mr. Beamish. "They had to get her out of the way. They planted a bomb in her car, but luckily for her, it got the garage boy instead. After that had failed, they planted a bottle of poisoned whiskey in her room. But Sergeant Sweeney, who doubtless had gone there to ask more questions about the bombing, took a slug of it first. The third attempt was last night, when Farrow's gorillas planned to kidnap her from this house and Mannering intended to announce he had prevailed on her to leave town. But I sneaked her out to a hotel first."

Wroth nodded. He said coldly: "Well, Mannering?"

"It's a lie," said Hartley Mannering. "All conjecture. Can he prove any of it?"

"Indeed," said Mr. Beamish reaching inside his coat and producing a piece of paper. "I had a long talk to Farrow last night. I pointed out to him that his only legitimate alibi in the Clineman affair could be given by my client. I demanded he sign a confession of Mannering's part in the deal or else's we'd explode Mannering's story and Miss Benham would refuse to testify she was with him. In other words Farrow would be left holding the bag."

Mannering blinked as he stared at the typewritten sheet in Mr. Beamish's hand. He said hoarsely: "I don't believe it."

"You know Farrow's signature?" said Mr. Beamish. "Look."

He held the paper out to Mannering. Mannering grabbed it and read. As he

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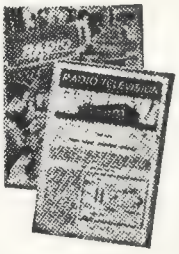

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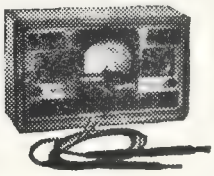

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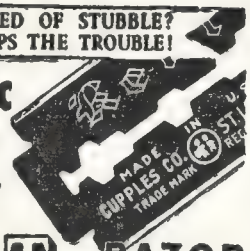


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finished he swore loudly. "That's his signature, all right. The double-crossing rat. He's in it as much as I am. It was his boys who planted the bomb and who planted the whiskey. It's his rap as much as mine."

Mr. Beamish glanced at Patrolman Hennessey who was writing swift hieroglyphics on the pad before him. "I think," he said to Wroth, "you have enough to book him."

Wroth nodded. "Hennessey," he said, "go upstairs with Mannering and see that he gets dressed."

Hennessey stood up. He escorted a shame-faced Mannering from the room. Mr. Beamish smiled. He picked up the paper which Mannering had just read, tore it in four neat pieces and dropped it in the waste paper basket.

Wroth said: "What are you doing?"

"Oh," said Mr. Beamish, "you won't need this. You have Mannering's confession before witnesses."

"But that Farrow confession is evidence, too."

"No, it isn't," said Mr. Beamish. "It's a phoney."

Wroth blinked and looked puzzled. "But Mannering recognized Farrow's signature."

Mr. Beamish laughed softly. He said: "Do you remember you sent me up once. One to three years, the sentence was indeterminate?"

"So?"

"Do you recall what you sent me up *for*?"

Wroth wrinkled his brow. Suddenly he threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Lord," he said at last, "it was second degree forgery, wasn't it?"

Mr. Beamish bowed slightly. There was a proud glint in his eye. He found himself wondering why people made so much fuss about the exploits of this Sherlock Holmes.

THE END

*(Continued from page 6)*

Would you consider it as a good argument for recommending mercy?

4

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1

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2

The judge will instruct the jury that if from the facts they conclude that Pat did retreat as far as he could go, and then did kill English in self-defense, the plea of self-defense is available to him even though he was the aggressor.

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3

A well educated man from a good family seems more culpable a criminal than the poor guy who never had a chance. In this case, the defense lawyers are propounding a syllogism as follows: "No accused man who has been handicapped by a bad family, bad education and bad companions should be sent to the electric chair. Our client is such an unfortunate. Therefore, he should not be sentenced to the electric chair."

If the premise on which the syllogism is based is sound, then it would appear that the electric chair was manufactured for exclusive use of people from good families, blessed with good education and good companions. The three judges in this case agreed with the above reasoning.

4

The penalty for voluntary manslaughter is severer than that for involuntary manslaughter because the latter involves no voluntary intent to kill. Voluntary manslaughter is a homicide with intent to kill, but free of malice, which is a necessary element of the act of murder.

You may well wonder how anyone can intentionally kill without malice. It is held that if the killer was moved to his act by reasonable provocation in sudden passion or "hot blood," malice was absent. Presumably he acted with fury knowing no malice. His act must follow immediately upon the provocation—if he had time to kill, he is presumed to have killed with malice. The provocation must involve actual personal violence.

Mere abusive words, slander or libel are not enough.

THE END

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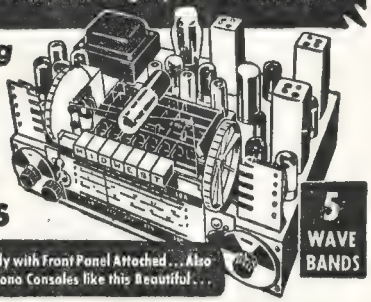

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# BULLETS, BALLISTICS AND BLOODSHED

**By J. E. B. COLE**

FOR MANY years it has been customary for ballistic engineers to be called into court for the purpose of giving expert opinion regarding firearms identification. In the early days during the development of the science of firearms investigation, the woods were full of self-styled "ballistic experts." These fee seekers generally had no technical training whatever, but perhaps had a smattering of acquaintance with a few small arms, and most definitely did have an unlimited amount of gall!

In many instances one or more of these phony experts were hired by both the plaintiff and the defendant. This, of course, resulted in conflicting testimony and opinions, and the spectacle of supposedly infallible experts arguing among themselves was very confusing to the court and the jury (to say the least).

Today it is practically impossible for such a condition to exist, for Firearms Investigation and Identification has really become an exact science.

A very famous case that demonstrates the value of such expert testimony is that of The State v. Harold Israel, Criminal Superior Court, Fairfield County, Connecticut, May 27, 1924.

Homer S. Cummings (later Attorney General of the United States) as State's Attorney, Stamford, Connecticut, recommended a *nolle prosequi* (unwilling to prosecute) of a murder charge in the first degree against Israel, largely as a

result of his opinion—and that of six expert ballisticians—that the bullet extracted from the brain of the murdered man had not been fired from the pistol of the accused.

On commenting upon evidence, the Honorable Homer S. Cummings stated: "This brings us to a general consideration of that class of expert testimony which deals with the identification of a bullet with a particular weapon where both are available for experimentation. In this case we have the Israel revolver and we have the mortal bullet.

"Any bullet discharged through a particular weapon will bear the mark of the weapon through which it has passed, and if the bullet be recovered and is in sufficiently good condition to be examined, it will often bear unmistakable traces of its previous history. Ordinarily, in such cases, witnesses measure the width of what are known as 'lands' and 'grooves' on the bullet. They then make a cast of a portion of the barrel of the suspected weapon and make duplicate measurements. They then discharge experimental shots through the suspected weapon and recover the bullets thus fired. These bullets are then measured in the same manner and compared by means of microscope and enlarged photographs with the suspected bullet."

In summing up this phase of the case, Mr. Cummings added: "After conferring at length with all of the ballistic engineers and having compared their opinions, I have no hesitancy in accepting the conclusions reached by the six gentlemen to whom I referred. Of course, the acceptance of that conclusion marks an end to the case. In the face of such an opinion it would be preposterous to contemplate a trial, and moreover it would be an injustice even to longer suspect Israel of murder." So do science and justice march hand in hand!

THE END

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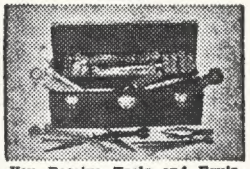
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*(Continued from page 95)*

Sloan walked from the shadows, stolid, slow-moving.

The homicide chief did two things rapidly. He bent and grasped Malmin's gun inside a handkerchief and placed the weapon on the table. Then he leaned toward Mrs. Choan and asked solicitously: "You all right?"

She nodded, smiling wanly. "Nervous, but all right, Captain."

Sloan telephoned headquarters and ordered an ambulance. Malmin sank weakly into a chair. His clouded mind fought toward clarity. He said chokingly: "This is a frame-up!"

"This lady's" Sloan answered. "Mrs. Choan's." The captain sat down so that the light fell full on his face. "She was sure you'd come, Malmin. I take off my hat to her. She even knew what you might do."

"Knew what?" The words were weak.

"Knew her husband, his habits, his store. And she knew you too—well enough. Came to us; told us you'd murdered him. But she had no proof. Said she'd get it. Wrote the letters, convinced you she was dangerous, worked you up. Pretty wonderful, I think."

"Wonderful!" Malmin tried for sarcasm. He got only a bleat.

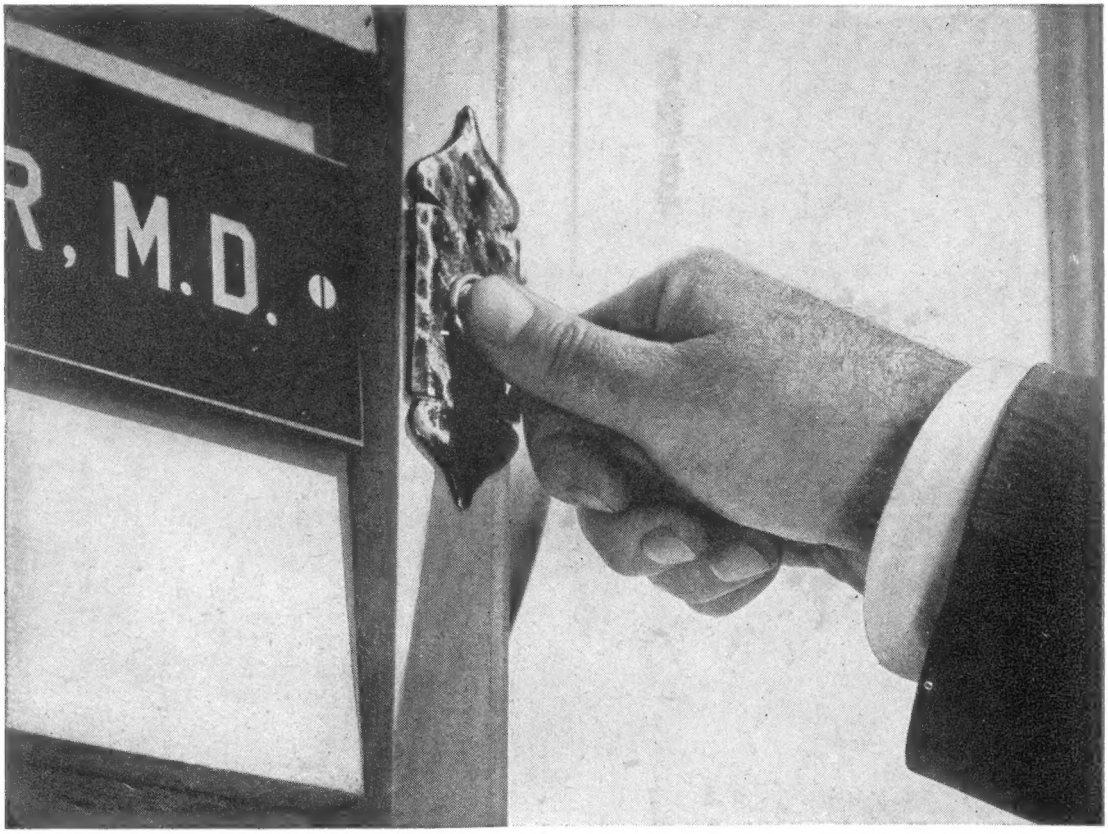
"Sure." Captain Sloan turned from the light to face the lawyer. "You see, counselor, Mrs. Choan really didn't know a thing. She didn't see you kill him. She didn't hear you kill him. She's stone-deaf."

"But—" It was a cry.

"Like a lot of deaf people she's a lip-reader. Her husband had told her all about you. Her brain did the rest."

Malmin saw her face. It was calm again, the wide gray eyes implacably upon him, focused on his mouth. He knew the captain was speaking the truth. He knew also he was going to faint.

THE END

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4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
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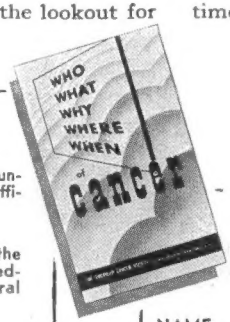


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